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Vol. XVIII, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION April, 1949

COMPLETE NOVEL

Sign of the Vigilantes

By Tom Curry

The Rio Kid and his battling band combat a brutal outlaw gang which pretends to side the law while plundering Montana's mines! Follow Bob Pryor as he fights renegades who ride under false colors! 13

SHORT STORIES

SATAN'S GATEWAY.....*Roy Vandergoot* 58
Lon Haskell's cavalry music makes the marauding redskins show their dust

HELL ON A .44 FRAME.....*John H. Latham* 69
Solo Smith's a bad shot, but his aim improves when outlaws bring trouble

BLOOD TALKS FOR TOLMAN.....*Francis H. Ames* 83
A young rancher gambles with death against his gunfighting rustler foes

FEATURES

THE BUNKHOUSE.....*Foghorn Clancy* 6
A department for readers conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

THE YANKEE GO-GETTERS.....*Harry Van Demark* 79
A true story of the pioneers of progress in the early era of railroading

Also See "Butte, Montana," Page 25; Portrait and Biography of Marcus Daly, Page 33; Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly, Page 37; "Liver-Eating" Johnson, Page 43; "How the Town Was Named," by Simpson M. Ritter, Page 68, and "The Balance," by Rex Sherrick, Page 78.

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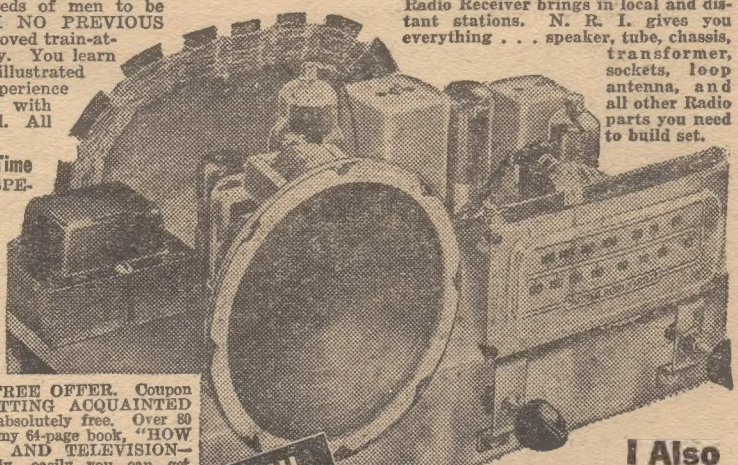

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THE Bunkhouse

A Department for Readers Conducted by FOGHORN CLANCY

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SINCE writing in this department about the old man in California who claimed to be Jesse James, I have had many letters from various parts of the country asking about it, and asking me if I really believed the claimant was the real Jesses James. These letters have come in dspite the fact that I stated at the time that so far as my viewpoint is concerned, I consider Jesse James deceased even though the claimant to being Jesse is supposed to have been OK'd by Al Jennings.

The latest letter on the subject is from G. G. Krause, of New Orleans, who states that on the very day that he read my article in this magazine there was an old man in New Orleans claiming to be Jesse James, which at least proves that both our magazine and the claimant do get around over the country.

Mr. Krause reports that in an interview with one of the New Orleans papers, the claimant said he had been living at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, since 1869 under the name of Frank Dalton. I have been around Ft. Sill several times within the past twenty years, and I recall that there was supposed to be a rather eccentric character living in a cabin in the hills, who seemed always to give the impression that he was an ex-outlaw, but I never heard anyone say that he claimed to be Jesse James.

The James-Younger Gang

Whether the claimant is the real Jesse James or not, his claims and interviews are hardly necessary to keep alive the fact that the Younger and the James boys combined made up one of the most notorious outlaw bands that America has ever known, and since their time many other outlaws have tried their best to reach the peak of notoriety in the criminal world that was held by the James-Younger gang in their heyday, and it will never be reached, because there are no bandits who can live long enough, in these modern days with modern methods of tracing criminals, to attain such a record.

The Youngers and the James family lived near the dividing line of the North and South prior to and during the start of the conflict called the Civil War. Here one might find brother against brother, and certainly neighbor against neighbor. The country was divided into two factions, and many communities were divided the same way.

There is no reason to doubt that the indignities and cruelty heaped upon their families by jayhawking Federals caused them to rally around the black flag of Quantrell and start their careers of outlawry.

Bank Robberies

Quantrell himself had resorted to guerrilla warfare for the sake of revenge for the murder of his brother and the almost fatal wounding of himself by jayhawkers. The terrible "Black oath" which he required each member to take made them swear to tear down, lay waste, despoil and kill without mercy each and every enemy that they could. Being a clever and alert leader with a band of the most reckless men who ever wore guns, Quantrell was equipped to make plenty of trouble for his enemies.

After the close of the war, the guerillas turned to raiding and bank robbing. It was rumored that the guerrillas were going to raid Pleasant Hill, Missouri, the main object of the raid being to release a guerilla named

(Continued on page 8)

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

Maddox who had been captured, and while all the male citizens of Pleasant Hill were armed and ready to stand off the attack, the Clay County Bank at Liberty, not far away, was robbed. Then it dawned upon the citizens that attention had been directed to Pleasant Hill for the purpose of throwing citizens of Liberty off guard. Cole Younger and the James boys were accused of this bank robbery, and although Cole Younger is said to have denied this as well as many other depredations, they nevertheless got the blame for this robbery.

Then followed the looting of the bank at Lexington, Missouri, and other bank robberies. In each case there were five outlaws on the job, men who were not afraid, who went about the business of bank robbing in a smooth working manner. Each man seemed to know his place and just what part he was to play. They would strike quickly and with precision, have the spoils and be gone before anyone outside of the bank knew that there was a robbery going on.

The excitement in Missouri over bank robberies and other depredations, known to have been perpetrated by the same organized band of outlaws, alerted all the officers and bank officials and the outlaws decided that they had best try new fields for a while. They therefore decided to shift their operations to Kentucky for a time, and went to Nelson county, where one of the band, George Shepherd, had lived and established headquarters and proceeded to plan the robbing of the bank at Russellville, the county seat of Logan county.

Change for a Fifty

A man calling himself Colburn, but who was afterward said to be Cole Younger, visited the bank on two or three occasions on a pretense of getting bills changed, and thus looked over the situation. Then a few days after his last visit, Colburn and another man rode up to the bank and dismounted. They came into the bank and this time Colburn wanted change for a $50.00 bill. The banker, a Mr. Long, was looking over the bill to see if it was genuine when he was confronted with revolvers and he and the other two men in the bank were ordered to keep quiet.

Long showed fight, or at least tried to run

(Continued on page 10)

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 8)

out of the bank by the back door and give the alarm, and was momentarily stopped by one of the robbers who fired almost in the face of the banker. But the bullet just grazed his head. Long grappled with the outlaw and was clubbed with the gun and knocked down, but still managed to make his escape. As he rounded the bank corner to give the alarm, he saw that the other three men of the gang had taken up positions in front of the bank, and as the shot inside had already given the alarm, these men were shooting at all who showed themselves.

The two men inside the bank were held at bay by the two robbers while they proceeded to gather up the money. They secured in all about $14,000 and they were not in such a hurry as to take any bonds or anything that would be easy to trace them by, but by the time they had gathered up the money things were getting a bit hot for the guards outside the bank and they yelled for those in the bank to come on out.

The bandits made their exit from town amid a hail of lead, but the only casualty of the bandit crew was that one outlaw was shot in the arm. They rode rapidly away, as they were mounted on fine horses, and though a posse was quickly formed, within five miles of the town the trail was lost in dense timber.

Fighting Odds

Whatever else may be said of the Younger and James Boys, they lacked neither courage or nerve. One can imagine how a fellow feels when it seems plain that thousands are against him. When it comes to fighting great odds it takes courage, the brand of courage shown by Cole Younger in Louisiana after a horse race.

After the Russellville bank robbery, the gang split up for a time and Cole Younger went to Bastrop, Louisiana, where he had a few acquaintances. He brought with him a blooded horse which, though not appearing to be a race horse, had developed extraordinary speed. Cole was a horse racer, and, in fact, he never hesitated to lay a wager on either cards or horses, having a marked penchant for gambling.

He mingled with the sporting fraternity and a horse race was proposed. In fact, they

(Continued on page 91)

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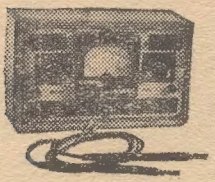

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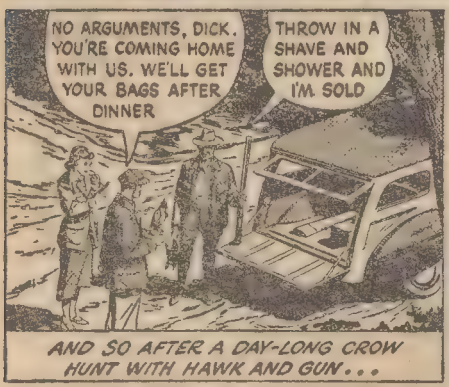

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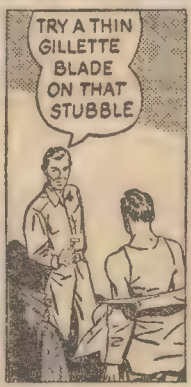

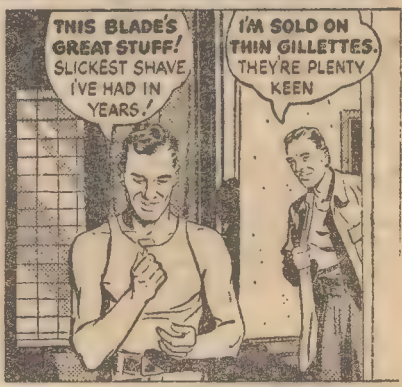

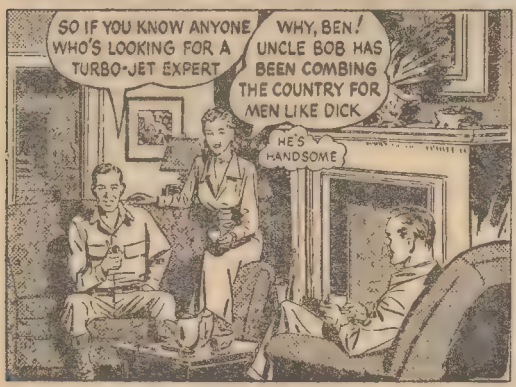
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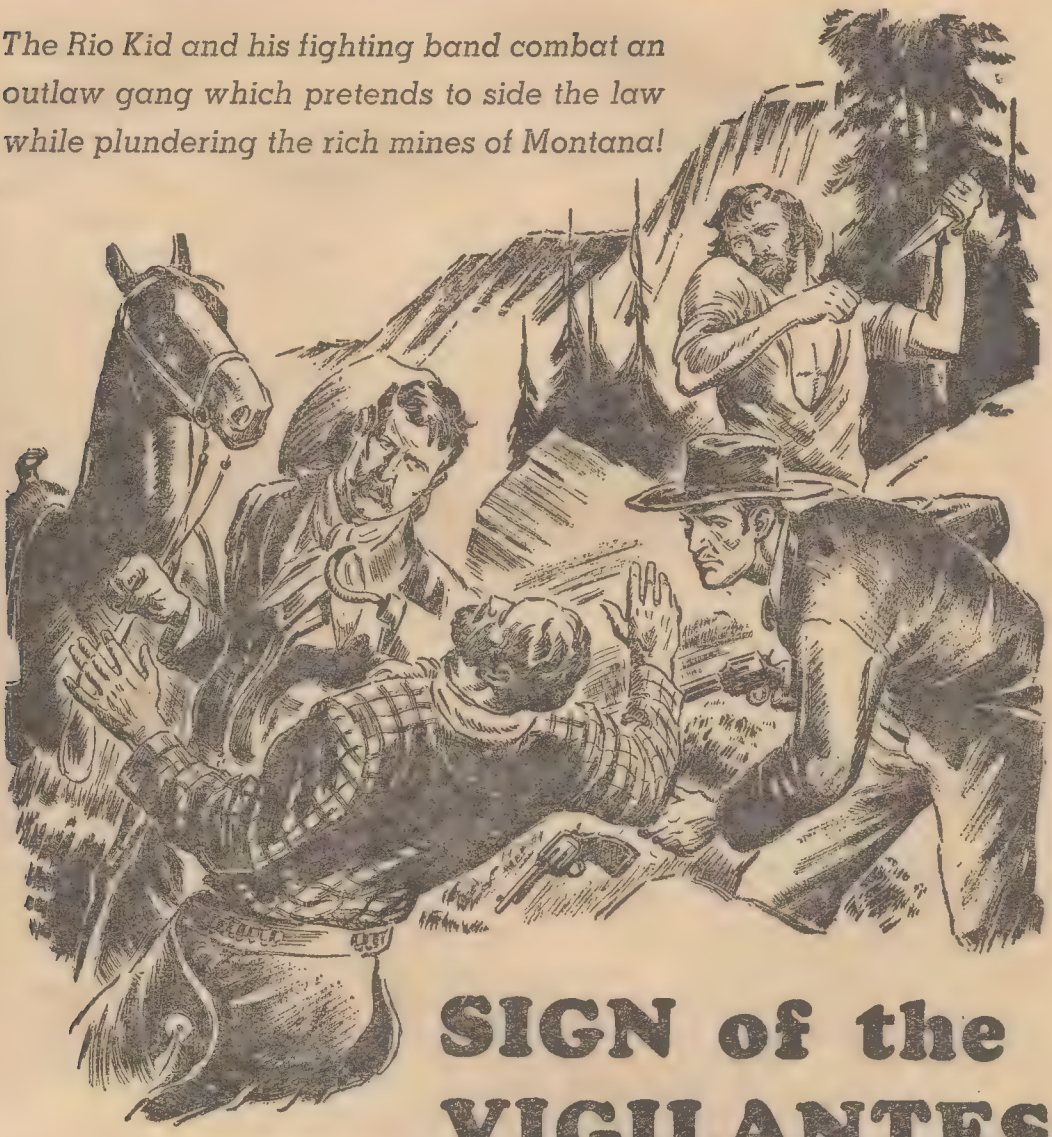


SIGN of the VIGILANTES

CHAPTER I

"3-7-77!"

THE summer sun was warm but the spicy air of western Montana was invigorating and sparkling as wine. The land was lovely. Mountains towered in an endless procession like strange giants on parade.

In broad amphitheaters nestled intensely blue lakes, the streams rising against rocky back walls. Here were park meadows and natural hot springs as Nature prodigally flung into the incredible landscape every trick of her unmatched artistry.

Two thousand miles eastward Ulysses S. Grant still occupied the White House. The Civil War was still fresh, the men who had fought it still hostile toward those who had been enemies.

Bob Pryor Roars Into Action to Smash the Evil

But huge as the land was constant struggle went on over real or fancied riches in many limited areas. Men had invaded this spot ahead of law and order. South lay the raw, crude mining settlement called Butte after the bare, corrugated peak, Big Butte, marking its site. In the mountain park cattle were grazing while the peace was disturbed by angry voices rising in dispute.

A score of armed fellows in leather or corduroy, felt hat brims shading tough, browned faces, stood by their saddled mustangs.

Nearby three more faced a lone opponent, a man in rancher garb with a wide-brimmed Stetson. He stood up bravely. He was nearing fifty, his cropped beard touched by gray. He had an open, decent look which the others lacked.

The trio's chief was clad in elegant fashion. His riding breeches were of fine whipcord material, his boots polished and of the best leather. A black hat was set straight on his long head, trimmed sparsely with stringy dark hair. Tall and thin, his lantern jaws were thrust out in a stubborn set. Thick brows knitted over cold, fish-blue eyes and he kept playing with a massive yellow-gold ring set with a large ruby, twirling this trinket as he talked.

"I've come from San Francisco, Kinny, to take charge in Montana." The voice was icily precise. He had a feline look and pouted in a spoiled manner. "I'm displeased with you."

Si Kinny stared. "I savvy Meathook Jabe, suh, and Knowles. But where do yuh come in? What's yore handle?"

"I am Ichabod Chasmer, the banker," Chasmer said impatiently.

"Oh." Kinny blinked for he had not heard of Chasmer before. The rancher sensed that he was in mortal danger and he sought to temporize, for he had been decoyed up here by a neat trick.

"I had a fuss with Meathook," drawled Kinny. "That's true. But I'm willin' to let bygones be bygones."

AT CHASMER'S right hand stood "Meathook" Jabe Torpy. He had a stout body, a long nose, the glittering eye of a snake and a thick walrus mustache. He wore leather and a brown Stetson, black boots.

In his youth he had lost his lower left arm in a hunting accident and it had been replaced by a steel shaft shaped at the end to a sharpened hook. This artificial extremity was most useful in rough-and-tumble disputes. And Meathook was also able to draw and fire his heavy Colt revolver, reposing at his burly hip, with startling celerity. These graces, along with a brutal, conniving mind which stopped at nothing, had fetched Torpy to the top of the outlaw heap.

At Chasmer's left bulked another aide, "Grizzly Lew" Knowles. His black, matted hair was bared to the sun and his great barrel chest pushed out his brown shirt. Stained corduroys were thrust into high-laced miner's boots and the man was armed with both gun and knife.

Kinny's saddled black horse stood behind him, as they had forced him to dismount after stepping out from the brush. But the rancher thought they would kill him when he turned.

"Let's ride down to my ranch and talk it over, Chasmer," suggested Kinny.

Meathook's lip curled up in sardonic amusement. He was enjoying Kinny's masked alarm, knew just what was going on in the victim's head. Kinny could feel the tension. Rumors about the evil deeds of Meathook and his band, riding masked as "vigilantes," as they operated in outlaw raids, had reached the cowmen settled in the valleys at the edge of the mining districts.

"Yuh got away from me by a trick before, Kinny," said Torpy. "I made yuh a fair offer."

"A fair offer! For one thing I don't want to sell. For another, yuh said yuh'd give me three hundred dollars for my land and stock."

Kinny was angry. Suddenly he knew they were going to kill him, that the moment had come. Ichabod Chasmer had turned the ruby inward and raised his hand. Meathook lunged at Kinny, the hook flashed in the sunlight, ripping at Kinny as he went for his gun in a

desperate, last-minute attempt to save himself.

Kinny screamed as he was violently jerked around. He struck and kicked Meathook, delaying Torpy's draw. But Chasmer coolly pulled a pistol and fired into the victim at pointblank range.

When they had robbed Kinny, Grizzly Lew Knowles hoisted the dying man and carrying him over, dumped him under a tall lodgepole pine. Meathook stooped to adjust a noose around Kinny's throat while another man threw the free end of the long lariat over a limb.

"Don't hoist him yet," ordered Meathook.

He extracted a sheet of paper from a pocket and secured it to Kinny's shirt front. On it in red figures was the legend "3-7-77."

They pulled on the rope and left the rancher dangling.

* * * * *

Mike Reed turned to his comrade, Ag Norris. "They've finished him off, Ag."

"It was a cold-blooded killin'," gasped Norris. "Let's get, Mike. If they spy us we'll draw the same hand."

Reed was a big youth with a shock of yellow hair and wide-set, pleasant brown eyes. Several years in the wilderness of the upper Missouri and Montana had hardened him and taught him to take care of himself, dodging Sioux and other savage menaces common to the region. His long-muscled body was clad in soft fringed buckskin, a coon cap was on his head. He carried a heavy rifle good for buffalo and other large game, a hunting knife and a few other articles needed in his trade as a free-lance trapper.

The fortunes of war had sent Mike Reed to the Northwest. He had been born in Virginia and when hardly fourteen the Civil War had broken out. Husky for his age, Reed had joined the Southern forces and served as a courier on the western front until a Union cavalry patrol had surrounded and captured him.

BOB PRYOR

WHEN the war had ended, Reed had gone to Montana.

Ag Norris was slimmer, younger than Reed, with a thin, dark face. He had been born in California and had gone to Nevada's Comstock Lode and thence to Montana. Reed and he had hit it off and had turned to hunting, supplying Butte miners with fresh meat, a profitable and exciting job.

Today they had come up through the woods in time to see the killing but unable to prevent it.

The Rio Kid signaled the wolf hunters to begin firing by sending lead slicing at the advancing foe. (CHAP. II)

Their saddle and pack horses, loaded with meat, were not far off. The two youths turned to hurry away and found they were themselves being watched by a couple of bearded, tough fellows who had stolen up silently on them.

"Reach!" ordered one, his carbine raised.

The other sang out to the main band in the clearing and these hurriedly mounted, led by the stout figure with the steelhook hand.

Reed and Norris knew they stood no chance of escaping. They were cut off from their mounts. Both reacted swiftly, throwing themselves aside. The carbine cracked and Norris grunted, his right shoulder slashed by a bullet. Reed made it, diving behind a thick-boled pine but his partner, slowed by the wound, was hit again, this time through the body.

Reed had his rifle up and he fired from the hip as he squatted at the side of the tree. The gunslinger who had shot his friend was knocked down, the second hastily threw a Colt slug which grooved the trunk two feet over Reed's head.

Norris lay gasping on the ground, but Reed's fire had sent the outlaw running, yelling hoarsely to his friends. They were coming fast.

Reed had a few moments. "Ag! How bad is it?" he cried.

Norris moaned. "Go on. Go on, run, Mike. I'm done for."

"No, yuh ain't. I'll carry yuh to Butte. Brace up, Ag." Reed picked up his comrade who was in agony.

Norris was light and Reed very strong. The hunter ran through the forest, his friend over one shoulder. But the riders had seen him as they broke into the woods, and pursued them.

Bullets hailed about Reed. One burned his arm but he kept going. The man with the steel-hook hand roared orders which sent horsemen circling in both directions to cut off Reed.

There was only one thing to do. The gasping hunter saw a small depression, fringed by jagged rocks and he made for it and ducked down, placing Ag Norris under cover. Then he turned to defend himself.

He hit a horse and pinked another of his enemies. But by this time the ring had been formed and they had Mike Reed in the center. It was only a question of waiting.

"Feel any better, Ag?" asked Reed in

a lull.

Norris did not reply. He seemed relaxed and Reed realized he was unconscious, but his heart still beat weakly.

CHAPTER II

The Wolf Hunters

ABRUPTLY the Rio Kid swung in his saddle to speak to Yellowstone Kelly, riding near him.

"Sounds like the Battle of the Wilderness, Yellowstone. What yuh reckon goes on over there?"

"Yellowstone" Kelly shrugged. "A real fight. Mebbe the Sioux got somebody treed."

"We better see." Bob Pryor, known on the Frontier as the Rio Kid, veered Saber, his mouse-colored dun.

Pryor was a handsome, debonair young fellow, a trained and hardened campaigner. The danger trails held an irresistible fascination for him and he craved excitement as part of his daily menu. His eyes were a steady blue, his face bronzed by sun and wind. Broad shoulders pushed out his Army tunic, and he tapered to a narrow waist where cartridge belts supported the oiled cases holding his fine six-shooters.

He was the ideal size for a cavalryman and throughout the Civil War had fought in the Union Army as Captain Robert Pryor, scouting for Grant, Sheridan and Custer. Though born in Texas he had chosen to stand for an undivided nation. His felt Stetson was narrower of brim than the usual cowboy hat and his whipcord breeches had a yellow stripe on them, cavalry trousers tucked into high black boots with Army spurs.

Pryor had made a fine name for himself in the Army. The Rio Kid was known throughout the West as a man on whom the oppressed could count.

Saber, his war horse, had a black stripe down the middle of his back, "the breed which never dies." Although unprepossessing in looks the dun could run like a deer.

There were four riders in Pryor's party. Yellowstone Kelly was famous as a scout and hunter throughout the upper Missouri area and in Montana. He had been christened "Luther S." and at fourteen had enlisted in the Union Army. Then at the war's end he had been shipped West. On being discharged, Kelly had roamed the region as a trapper and dispatch bearer.

"The Little-Man-With-The-Big-Heart" was the Indians' name for Kelly. Supple as a panther, fearless and enterprizing, Kelly rivalled his friend the Rio Kid in good looks. He had well-moulded features, a strong chin and clear eyes. He wore a dark mustache and his hair curled to his shoulders under his large sombrero. In the hunting field he wore deerskin, and leather gantlets, his heavy rifle under one leg in its oiled case, pistol at his side.

Celestino Mireles, the bony, tall Mexican, was Pryor's regular trail *compadre,* following wherever the Rio Kid led. He wore pliant velvet, a steeple sombrero strapped on his black-haired head. Mireles had a patrician cast to his features, a hawk nose and ascetic lips. He was most expert with the long knife, and carried a pearl-handled six-gun and a hunting rifle as well. The Rio Kid had snatched the youth from death when bandits had struck the Mireles rancho in old Mexico.

The fourth man was another celebrated hunter and scout, known as "Liver-Eating" Johnson. He was one of three brothers and his nickname came from his repeated threat to eat the liver of any enemy who dared annoy him. Johnson was wiry, and had let his beard and hair grow. He had a wild aspect but was very dependable when he was needed by a friend.

They were driving a band of pack animals ahead of them along the faint mountain trail, a shortcut over to Butte where they intended cashing in on their hides. The quartet had just completed a protracted hunting expedition and had wolf skins and other valuable products, including some placer gold they had picked up in a stream. The bales were skilfully stowed and roped to the special pack saddles.

"How about our stuff, Rio Kid?" called Liver-Eating Johnson.

"Let 'em go. They'll stop to graze and we'll pick 'em up later."

The Rio Kid swung into the lead as they cut through the woods toward the exploding guns disturbing the peace of

the hills.

Half a mile in from the trail they sighted figures crouching behind wide tree trunks or boulders, intent on blasting somebody holed up in a rock nest they had ringed. As the Rio Kid neared the western perimeter a man bobbed up to throw a couple of slugs at his foes.

"What holds?" sang out Pryor. His voice could carry above the roar of battle.

THE four wolf hunters were strung out, and their weapons were on the alert. They glimpsed bearded, startled faces as some of the men jumped and

CELESTINO MIRELES

whirled at the Rio Kid's stentorian hail. Instead of parleying the attackers hastily turned their guns on Pryor and his friends, opening fire on the riders who had come up. Yells of warning sounded.

Close ones whistled around the Rio Kid and his friends. They ripped at their reins, scattering off to save their horses. The quartet left saddle at Pryor's waved command. Each had his loaded rifle, at least two pistols and his skinning knife. The fact that the tough looking bunch had shot at them without even a how-do-you-do marked them as in the wrong. The Rio Kid decided they were bandits, plenty of which infested the lawless mountains.

Seeing only four opponents, the gunslingers whooped and charged through the woods to sweep them up. The Rio Kid's hand signal sent accurate lead slicing into the fierce foe. A couple fell headlong, others yipped and veered.

"Go get 'em!" bellowed a leader, over on the other side.

The Rio Kid glimpsed a stout figure through the trees but he was busy helping check the charge. Yellowstone Kelly, Mireles and Johnson had taken cover and their rifles kept blaring.

The attackers faltered, turned and ran, shooting back. By the time Pryor had worked his way to the west edge of the mountain meadow the gunhands had mounted and were quirting and gouging their mustangs into the woods.

Making sure the enemy had decamped, the Rio Kid retraced his steps and hailed the man in the rocks.

"My handle is Mike Reed. They've about finished my pardner. Who are yuh?" The answer to Pryor was in a young, firm voice.

"The Rio Kid," replied Pryor. "What was that bunch after yuh for, Reed?"

Reed said, "I saw 'em kill a rancher named Si Kinny. They strung his body to a tree."

"Yeah, it's danglin' out there." Pryor had noted the hanging corpse when he had crossed the park. "Come on out, yuh're safe." Reed still had not shown himself. Perhaps he suspected a trick.

"Howdy, Mike!" sang out Yellowstone Kelly, pushing forward so that Reed could get a clear look at him.

Now Mike Reed rose, a big youth with yellow hair and wide-set brown eyes. Through a tear in his buckskin sleeve blood could be seen where he had been wounded. He came slowly toward them.

"Mike and I trapped together one year," explained Yellowstone as he shook hands with Reed.

Reed nodded. "I've heard tell of yuh, Rio Kid." Pryor liked his manner and appearance and they listened to the story of how Si Kinney had been slain, of the outlaw attack on Reed and Norris.

"My pard's bad hit, gents," went on Reed gravely.

The Rio Kid examined Norris, who was unconscious. "He's near gone," agreed Pryor. "But there's always a chance if a man's still breathin'. He needs attention and a place to rest. And yuh could stand some patchin' up yoreself, Reed."

"S'pose we head for Colonel Tex Audley's ranch?" suggested Johnson. "He's a fine feller and will give yuh anything he owns. It ain't far off."

"That's the best idea yet," said the Rio Kid.

Celestino and Kelly rode off to pick up the pack animals while the Rio Kid and Johnson stayed by Norris, giving him what rough first-aid they could.

In less than an hour Yellowstone and the Mexican returned with the train. A strong, docile horse was unloaded and Mireles mounted with the senseless Norris secured before him. Reed took the Mexican's coal-black gelding, a spirited creature of Arab strain.

They moved through the mountain park, and the Rio Kid signaled Yellowstone.

THE two men sat in their saddles, staring at the dangling Kinny.

"Three, seven, seventy-seven," read Pryor aloud. The crude red figures stood out in the late afternoon light.

"It's a vigilante sign, Rio Kid. S'posed to be the dimensions of a grave. Outlaws use it now to screen their gunnin's and robberies."

The others were proceeding north down the grassy slope. Pryor brought over a horse and they cut down Kinny, fastening him to the spare animal.

"Mike Reed had a good look at those cusses," remarked the Rio Kid as they followed their friends. "Yuh been around these mountains a lot, Yellowstone. Any guess as to who that chief with the hook hand might be?"

"I got a sneakin' hunch. Meathook Jabe Torpy would fill the bill."

Yellowstone knew about Tex Audley, too. "Yeah, he's from Texas. He fit in the War for the South. He's married, and has a mighty pretty daughter and two boys."

The sun was about to dip behind the distant crags as they pulled into the yard at Audley's A-1 Ranch. The buildings nestled in a widening valley watered by a sparkling creek. The ranchhouse was constructed of thick pine logs, a one-storied home with narrow windows standing on the shelf above high-water mark. A bunkhouse, sheds and smaller structures, split-rail corrals, gear and wagons completed the settings.

As Pryor and Yellowstone rode up, a large, bearded man in rancher clothes and a great sand-colored slouch hat hurried out to greet his guests. Colonel Tex Audley was fifty, his raven hair salted by the years. He had lively black eyes and shaggy eyebrows.

Liver-Eating Johnson dismounted to shake hands and point out his friends to the rancher, who welcomed them in a pleased, booming voice. "Light and set gents! This is a real compliment, havin' yuh stop here." Audley had a Southerner's open-handed hospitality.

The Rio Kid saw a slim young woman, dark of hair, lovely in a plain blue dress, in the doorway of the house. "That's the daughter, I reckon," he decided. Her large violet eyes touched him for a moment but modestly dropped. Her face was sweet, of oval mold, and she was in the first flush of youth's full beauty.

A couple of rollicking lads, one fifteen, the other a year or two older, rushed from the barn to find what the excitement was all about. An older woman, plumper and with gray showing in her hair, emerged from the kitchen, drying her hands on a cloth. There were four or five cowboys approaching as well. Visitors did not come every day to the A-1.

Liver-Eating Johnson, who was a friend of Audley's, quickly explained what had occurred. Audley's hot temper flared.

"They killed Si Kinny? I'll skin the scalawags for that. What's his wife and kids to do with Si gone? I'll send over a wagon to fetch 'em right now." He gave orders and three cowboys went to hitch up a flat wagon in which to transport the victim's family.

They carried Ag Norris inside. "This here is my wife, boys," said the colonel. "And my girl Harriet."

The Rio Kid was struck by Harriet's ethereal quality. She smiled at them as her father introduced the strapping young fellows, including Mike Reed. Glancing at the hunter they had saved, Pryor decided that he was not the only one smitten by the pretty girl.

The boys, Young Tex and Jimmy, seemed tremendously intrigued by the visitors and the startling events and news.

As were most Frontier women, Lillian Audley was a capable nurse. She examined Ag Norris but shook her head.

"He's dying," she told them sadly.

The man with the shotgun raised his weapon, but the Rio Kid fired first (CHAP. XII)

"There's nothing to be done for him."

Harriet had brought a basin of hot water and clean cloths with which she was assiduously cleansing Mike Reed's hurts and bandaging his wounds. Reed never took his eyes off the girl.

Audley set forth drinks for them. The night fell suddenly over the land and the sky was speckled with stars while over the majestic mountains showed the glow of a rising moon. Soon they sat at the long slab table off the kitchen and the women served them with plentiful food.

BEFORE the meal they had unsaddled, unloaded the pack horses and turned their mustangs into a split-rail corral. After dinner they sat smoking on the stoop, talking things over with Colonel Audley.

"I don't savvy why they'd want to kill pore Si," said Audley. "He did have a fuss with Meathook Torpy. Torpy wanted him to sell his ranch for a song."

"Yuh have any trouble with this Torpy yoreself, Colonel?" asked the Rio Kid.

"No. He stopped here once. Meathook's mighty tough and had a bunch of mean lookin' riders with him."

"It wasn't Meathook who shot yore friend, Colonel," spoke up Mike Reed. "Like I said it was this dude in fancy ridin' pants and a brown silk shirt. Meathook helped and so did a great big hombre with a black beard."

"Would yuh be able to identify those killers if yuh run across 'em again?" asked Audley.

"I shore would," replied Reed earnestly. I'll never forget the cusses, not after what happened. They went for Kinny, then come after Ag and me."

"They figgered yuh'd seen too much, Mike," said the Rio Kid.

Celestino Mireles had strolled out to see his black gelding.

"General!" The Rio Kid's *compadre* suddenly called from the dark perimeter outside the light circle. Mireles often addressed his partner as "General" out of the great respect and admiration he held for Bob Pryor.

Quietly the Rio Kid slid out to join him. "What's wrong?"

"I theenck I see hombre crawl behind bush out zere," whispered Mireles, pointing at a black blotch a hundred yards north of the house.

"It wouldn't be the men comin' with the wagon. I better check up. Go tell Audley and the others to move out of the light."

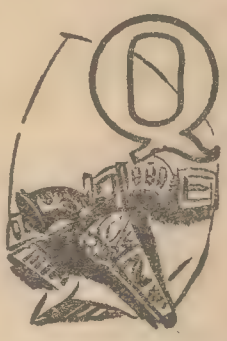
The Rio Kid made sure his Colts were loose in their holsters as he walked casually over to the corral. Gliding along the fence he reached a barn and silently slid around the dark side, ears and eyes alert.

He was but five yards away from the brush patch when a carbine flamed from the bushes. The bullet sang past his ear and he dropped to one knee, his Colt in play. He fired three times, spacing the shots, and a man began howling in alarmed pain.

From an arc almost enclosing the ranch, dark figures sprang up. Pistols, rifles and shotguns joined in a rattling volley as the attackers, hurried by the probing of the Rio Kid, rose and roared in.

CHAPTER III

Butte



QUICKLY the Rio Kid raced for cover as bullets hummed in the night air. He made the barn corner and paused to hurl lead at charging shadows. Hoarse orders and calls, exploding weapons and thudding boots told him a powerful band was attacking Audley's. He could see the powder flashes all around as they rapidly closed in, coming on foot.

So heavy was the fire that the Rio Kid quickly revised his plan of sticking in the barn and catching them as they passed. He sang out to his friends and raced to the ranchhouse, entering by a side door.

"Douse the lamps," he shouted.

Young Tex and Jimmy Audley instantly obeyed the Rio Kid's command. Colonel Audley, Liver-Eating Johnson, Kelly and the rest had picked windows or doors from which to shoot.

Vague scuttling figures could be seen by the marksmen in the house. The wolf hunters were expert and their rifles banged. A couple of the rushing toughs went down.

In the flares the Rio Kid had a brief glimpse of a burly figure, the glint of ruby light on a steel-hook arm. "Meathook Torpy," he muttered. His hunch had proved correct. They had come for Reed, the dangerous witness of Si Kinny's killing.

Pryor sent slugs at the spot where he had spied Meathook, hoping to make a lucky strike. His friends were just as busy. Harriet and her mother coolly reloaded guns for the men. Both Young Tex and Jimmy Audley were fine shots and held loopholes. The Frontier was a rough school and boys graduated early out there.

Several of Torpy's band actually reached the doors and tried to smash in. The din rose to a high, ferocious pitch, bursting hate dominating the scene. The Rio Kid, Yellowstone Kelly and Mireles leaned out, to shoot at the sharp angle needed to hit the bolder spirits of Meathook's outlaw band.

The seconds of time seemed very long but actually only two to three minutes had passed since the start of the mass attack.

It was Meathook Torpy's harsh voice which gave Pryor a hint that the worst was over. The outlaw field chief began cursing furiously as his men turned to run, appalled at the redhot welcome afforded them by the wolf hunters at the A-1. Shooting as they retreated the outlaws sought protection behind the bunkhouse and barn. A lull came and smoky dust drifted slowly off, leaving the moonlit areas peaceful as ever.

"Audley!" Torpy was calling to the cowman.

"Answer him, Colonel," advised the Rio Kid.

He squatted beside Tex Audley as the rancher replied. "What yuh want? How dare yuh come at me, yuh outlaw hounds!" Audley was steaming with pentup rage at the wanton, unprovoked assault. "There's women and children in here, yuh might have killed 'em."

"We're the Mountain Boys, the Vigilantes, Audley." Meathook was unimpressed by the colonel's righteous anger. "Yuh're shieldin' a killer and yuh'll pay for it. Turn him over to us and we'll leave."

"Draw him out, Colonel," whispered Pryor.

"Who yuh talkin' about?" demanded Audley.

"That mealy-mouthed hombre with the yeller hair, yuh savvy what I'm sayin'," shouted Meathook. "Do yuh know he shot one of yore neighbors, Si Kinny, up in the hills this afternoon? Hand him out before we tear yore house down."

"Somebody else will get torn if yuh don't sashay," snapped Audley defiantly. "Yuh're a passel of lyin' rascals, Torpy."

There was a brief silence. Meathook would understand now that the rancher was certain of his identity.

"I've given yuh yore chance, Audley," said Torpy in a cold, deadly voice. "We'll never let up till yuh've eat dirt."

"I'll see what the law says about all this," threatened the colonel.

MEATHOOK broke off the truce parley. His men opened fire again but there were no more charges. "Save yore ammunition, boys," ordered the Rio Kid. "They're snakin' out their wounded and dead." Vague figures moved in the darkness. After a time they heard the beating of many hoofs diminishing southward as Meathook Torpy and his toughs hit the trail.

The wolf hunters and Audley took stock. Several had minor scratches from flying splinters or glass. Reed's partner Ag Norris had expired but it was not due to the battle at the A-1. Norris had been dying when they had brought him in.

Bob Pryor and his friends checked around the environs of the ranch to make certain the self-styled "vigilantes" had really left. On the back of the barn the Rio Kid paused as he stared in the light of his lantern at large, red-painted figures, the vigilante sign: "3-7-77!" Beside them was a crudely drawn skull and crossbones.

Somebody hailed the ranch from the north trail down the creek valley. It was one of Audley's cowboys, returning with Kinny's wife and three young children. The spring wagon was nearing the A-1, Mrs. Kinny and her son and two daughters riding in it. When they reached the ranch, Mrs. Audley and Harriet took them in hand for the widow was prostrated at the terrible news. . . .

In the main room the men sat around enjoying a drink and smoke before turning in. At the Rio Kid's advice Colonel Audley had posted a cowboy night guard outside.

Liver-Eating Johnson's wild black beard bristled and his shrewd eyes gleamed in the lamp's glow as he squatted in a corner listening to the review of the battle. Yellowstone Kelly was smiling, Mireles at his side. Mike Reed had a serious expression on his young, bronzed face. He kept glancing from Audley's strong face to the handsome Rio Kid who had stepped into the commander's position during the scrap. Men would follow and obey Bob Pryor.

After a while Reed spoke up, "I'm mighty sorry, Colonel Audley. If I'd savvied they'd come at yuh on my account I'd never have come here."

"Don't mention it," cried Audley. "Yuh're welcome, Reed. Any time."

Pryor could tell that Mike Reed felt guilty, believed he had drawn the outlaws upon Audley's head. "Let's get this straight," said the Rio Kid. "The first thing happened was that Meathook's dude pard downed Si Kinny up there. After that the toughs went for yuh and yore friend Ag, and then we horned in. It's true that Torpy trailed us down. But if all he'd wanted was Reed, they'd have asked for him before they come at the ranch the way they did. Yuh agree, Colonel Audley?"

"By gee, I do," shouted Audley, banging a fist on the arm of his chair.

"Si Kinny was y o r e neighbor, Colonel," continued Pryor. "There's more to this than a wanton killin' and attempt to cover up by Torpy and his band. Yuh must stay on guard, savvy, till we find what the vigilante game is. Now, we're on our way to Butte to sell our hides and metal. If you say the word we'll throw in with yuh and see this thing through to the bitter end. Yuh'll need help if Meathook's on the prod."

"Real white of yuh, I must say," answered Audley with grateful courtesy.

"Count me in, suh," begged Mike Reed.

Audley's nod and wave told Reed he was one of the inner circle with the colonel. It had not been many hours since they had arrived at the A-1 but what they had been through had quickly cemented relations. Pryor did not need to consult his wolf hunters for he could see by their attitudes that his partners were all for the job of bracing Meathook. It would provide a different brand of excitement and that was what all enjoyed.

"We'll snooze here tonight and head for Butte first thing in the mornin'," declared Bob Pryor. "Reed, yuh better stick here and rest up. Meathook might have yuh drygulched in town and the Colonel can shore use an extra hand."

REED was agreeable. He had been a soldier and was disciplined, recognizing the true authority of the Rio Kid's natural leadership. Audley, Johnson and Kelly were strong men but they too were glad to follow Pryor. . . .

Butte was in its lusty childhood. The four wolf hunters debouched from a rocky trail onto the sloping hillside. They drove their laden pack animals before them and were strung out for defense against possible ambush. All the way through they had been on the watch for Meathook Torpy and his band.

The Rio Kid was up front, next came Celestino Mireles, then Yellowstone Kelly. Liver-Eating Johnson, wiry and shrewd, held the rear. They rode slowly, letting the pack horses set the pace. Rifle across pommel, sharp eyes darting here and there as they moved, each wolf hunter made a picture of self-assured Frontier power. They knew how to proceed in hostile Sioux country and this situation was about the same except that renegade whites were often more fiendishly tricky than untutored savages.

Butte lay against its hillside. It rose in steep, uneven steps, like a vast, disorderly manuscript, from Silver Bow Creek, the Clark Fork of the Columbia. The river flowed through a flat and almost treeless valley. In some quiet byway pools the water was a strange, deep blue, the result of metal salts, for under the town lay one of the greatest mineral deposits in the world.

The gallows frames of mine shafts, ore dumps, mining gear, pockmarked the site. All sorts of shelters had been hastily erected, some of mountain timber, logs or roughed-out boards, others of canvas. The railroad had not yet arrived but the steel fingers were swiftly approaching the settlement.

Northwest towered Big Butte, that volcanic cone from which the place took its name.

It was a mining town, prodigal, gay-living, rough-and-ready. On Saturday nights Butte roared with rollicking humor. Saloons and gambling houses

BUTTE, MONTANA

BUTTE lies against a bare south-sloping hillside, its buildings rising in uneven steps. Yellow and gray copper ore dumps and mine shaft frames pockmark the site. Silver Bow Creek—the Clark Fork of the Columbia—flows west through a flat and almost treeless valley between barren mountains.

Northwest towers Big Butte, a volcanic cone from which the city takes its name. Beneath the city lies one of the most fabulous mineral deposits in the world. Since 1864 Butte has produced nearly three billion dollars worth of metals.

In 1864 a couple of prospectors found placer gold in Silver Bow Creek. Silver was discovered later and this brought Marcus Daly, who sank shafts and began striking copper.

A townsite patent was issued in 1876, the city incorporated in 1879. Today Butte is the copper metropolis of America. Butte copper has a greater tensile strength than other ores and is used in products which must stand greater strains. In Frontier times Butte was wild and woolly, and even today it is a gay, rough-and-ready town.

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occupied every other structure. Butte was young, reckless, gallant and warm-hearted. Irish, Welsh and Cornish miners had been among the early settlers. Chinese had filtered in from California.

The streets were only the beaten, rutted earth, raw and reddish. Front Street paralleled the winding creek. Montana Street right-angled into Front, running north-and-south. Other tracks had been named after metals or neighboring states. Butte had only been in business as a white man's town since the War, when a couple of prospectors hunting gold had found placer deposits in the stream. Word spread that the black ledges of Butte were rich with silver and adventurers hurried to the spot, staking and jumping claims. Riff-raff, holduppers, cardsharps, painted women, had arrived for their share of the easy money. . . .

From the heights the wolf hunters could see over the settlement. Hard-working miners were digging in the

dirt, blasting out rock and sifting gravel. Stores were open, business booming. Cowboys and ranchers, in from the range, had parked their saddled mustangs or ranch wagons along the hitchrails.

The procession crossed Copper Street and moved south in the middle of Montana Street. Dust rose under the slow-beating hoofs of pack and ridden animals. On either side were buildings of various sizes and materials.

They had passed Quartz Street on which the first house had been built. The compound of the trader they intended doing business with stood on the river bank at the south end of Butte.

"Cl-x-x!" That was the sharp clucking of the Rio Kid's carbine as he cocked it. The sound warned the wolf hunters who slowed and made ready.

In the next block a protruding red-and-gold sign marked a dominant building, GRAND HOTEL. It was imposing, offering rooms and suites, gambling, a bar with free lunch and a dance floor.

At the curb waited a varnished Concord coach with four strong blacks hitched to it. Two drivers, armed with pistols and with rifles at hand in special racks, sat on the high box. The coach was yellow while large red-painted initials, IC, made a coat-of-arms on the bulging sides.

Down the line were several riders, slouched by saddled mustangs as though waiting for somebody or something to occur.

The Rio Kid and his party pulled off to one side, letting other traffic pass. Butte was lively and busy. As Pryor waited, two men emerged from the Grand. The light flashed on the steel shaft of Meathook Jabe Torpy's metal forearm as he waved it, making a point as he spoke with his companion. The Rio Kid recognized the stout outlaw chief with his thick mustache, Colts at his burly hips.

The four wolf hunters could account for any force short of an army in a free-for-all. They were prepared for battle.

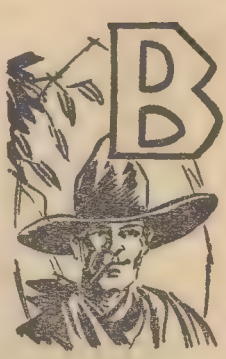
NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

THE YELLOWSTONE EMPIRE

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CHAPTER IV

Challenge



BOB PRYOR stared at Meathook Torpy's friend. He was tall with lantern jaws and dark hair under his canted derby. Thick brows knitted over his eyes and on one of his fingers a massive gold ring with a blood-red stone caught the sun.

"That must be the dude Reed told us about," thought the Rio Kid, noting the elegant black trousers, Congress gaiters and the starched white shirt. "He's changed his clothes but that's the hombre who shot Si Kinny!"

The monogram on the outfitted coach tickled his sense of humor. "I C U 2," he murmured to Yellowstone Kelly.

During the fight around the mountain park when the quartet had rescued Mike Reed from sure death, only a few of Meathook's gunhands had had glimpses of the wolf hunters. Now interposing traffic, the jut of a wall and a balcony built out over the gutter, partially hid the dusty party among their pack animals. And Meathook was busy talking with the dude.

The two entered the handsome coach. The drivers whipped up the blacks but instead of continuing north as they were headed, they made a U-turn and moved south on Montana Street. The dozen mounted guards swung in behind the rising dust ground up by the steel-rimmed wheels. At the next crossing the coach turned right and the structures hid them from Pryor's sight.

The Rio Kid signaled and they proceeded, reaching the trader's without further incident. Here they unloaded, their goods were appraised, a sharp bargain concluded. Money changed hands, the hunters divided up and leaving their pack animals to rest in a corral, the four rode back to the center of town.

A hearty meal of eggs, fried ham, rolls and coffee, dried-apple pie went down the hatch as they started spending their earnings at the Grand Hotel. A waitress who smiled upon the Rio Kid

with a softening look willingly gave them information. Yes, the gentleman with the steel arm was Mister Torpy. When in Butte he stayed at the Grand. The well-dressed person with him was a newcomer, and had arrived only a week ago.

He had rented the best suite in the house, Number 27, looking over the wide way. It had its own private balcony and consisted of two rooms. His name was Ichabod Chasmer. On the hotel register he had signed it with a flourish, and as his home had written *San Francisco.* The girl had heard Chasmer was a well-known banker. He was very wealthy and demanded the best of food and service.

"That's quite a coach he's got," remarked the Rio Kid, as the waitress lingered by him after bringing the order. "Did he bring it from California?"

"Yes, sir. They say he always travels in style. The coach is all fitted out, he had it specially built. I saw the inside of it the other day. The seats are velvet and have springs in them. They can be let down so Mr. Chasmer can sleep. A wagon filled with food and everything he needs follows so he can go anywhere and be as comfortable as he could be at home."

The arrival of such a notable and peculiar personage as Chasmer had naturally caused a stir in Butte. Chasmer's idiosyncrasies had been avidly discussed by the hotel staff. But they knew little of the banker's important interests.

"I think he came to see mining properties, sir," the waitress said. "That's what most everybody is after in town."

The Grand was expensive and the four wolf hunters decided to rent a tent on a back road where they could park their gear and have a headquarters in Butte. The sun warmed the city, while men feverishly sweated in the mines.

Night had fallen over the lusty settlement before Ike Chasmer's coach drew up in front of the hotel and let out the investment banker. Meathook Torpy was not with him although the armed guards brought the vehicle to the entrance before they swung off to unsaddle in the rear yard. Chasmer walked rapidly through the lobby, the desk clerk and manager respectfully greeting the important guest. He gave them a quick wave of his hand, the ruby ring shining from a long finger. If armed, his guns were under his white shirt. Chasmer went up the wooden stairs to his suite.

CELESTINO MIRELES and Liver-Eating Johnson were rapidly losing the hard-earned money they had in a gaming room. Now and then the sharp cry, "Keno!" could be heard over the general rattle of sounds. Glasses clinked, men's voices droned in the bar. The violins and accordion were threatening to start the music in the dance hall. Late diners occupied the tables. The Rio Kid and Yellowstone Kelly, unobtrusively seated behind a heavy wooden upright off to the side, smoked as they waited around.

The wolf hunters had spruced up. Butte was rousing itself for the evening's sport. Weary miners, stained by red clay and other materials that would not come off in a quick, cold-water washup, were relaxing after the dawn-to-dusk grind. Liquor was a prime requirement of the majority. From the shadowy dens where they had hidden throughout the day the denizens of the demi-monde had crept forth to ply their trades. Roulette wheels and dice clicked, cold-eyed professional gamblers sat with unchanging faces before their tables.

"Here comes the dude," murmured Yellowstone, nudging his comrade.

Ichabod Chasmer had changed his shirt and put on a jacket and stringtie. He was hatless, his stringy dark hair plastered to his bony skull. He moved with a feline grace and the Rio Kid caught the cold sheen of his fish-blue eyes as Chasmer turned and entered the dining room.

Chasmer took a long time over his meal, drinking wine, enjoying a roast bird, imported delicacies. He lit a black cheroot after he had finished his dinner and studied some papers he took from his pocket. He glanced several times at his gold watch as he smoked and read.

The Grand was crowded. Such spots served as business offices to the majority of settlers and deals were drawn up and put through in the bars or at tables.

Two men entered the main doors and Chasmer quickly rose and glided to the lobby, gave them a nod. One was a giant, with black, matted hair and a great barrel chest thrusting out his

shirt. His corduroy pants were tucked into high-laced miner boots and he was armed with a Colt and a knife. His eyes peered out over his black beard which grew as it willed, unimpeded by comb or scissors. A broken-bridged, upturned nose stuck from the center of his hairy face. His hands hung loosely as an ape's, scarred and dirty and the size of hams.

"That's the third," whispered the Rio Kid to Kelly. "Meathook and the big sidewinder helped Chasmer finish off Si Kinny."

With the miner was a small, flea-like fellow of fifty. His hair was white and his pink face smooth-shaven. He wore a neat blue suit, a ruffled shirt and stringtie and his eyes were quick and shifty.

When Chasmer greeted them both doffed their hats. After a word or two the trio went upstairs.

It was simple to learn the names of Chasmer's guests. "The big hombre is Lew Knowles. Some call him Grizzly Lew, he looks like a bear, savvy? He's a mine foreman. The old geezer is Judge Tate, one of the town magistrates." The desk clerk, a local youth, was glad to show his intimate knowledge to the inquiring hunters.

They knew the location of Chasmer's suite. They went up to the second floor. Brackets held small oil lamps lighting the halls. Red carpet runners deadened the sound of their footfalls. The door to Number 27 was shut and they could not hear anything save the low murmur of voices inside, over the noises of the hotel and street.

The two moved to the far end of the corridor and paused. "I need to learn what's goin' on, Yellowstone," said the Rio Kid. "Come to think of it I noticed a narrow balcony runnin' along this side. Stick at this turn, Yellowstone. If yuh hear a ruckus, kick in the door and start shootin'."

THE Rio Kid climbed outside. By ducking he was able to avoid being seen by possible occupants of rooms opening on the gallery though few were in so early. At the front only a railing separated him from Chasmer's balcony and the large sign cast a convenient shadow. Keeping low he inched to a window wide in the night. Now he could hear what was being said. A strong voice he was certain must belong to Chasmer was laying down the law:

"Judge, I mean to shove Daly and his faction out of Butte!"

"Marcus Daly's a mighty strong man, Mr. Chasmer." Judge Tate spoke his fearful protest in a sycophant's whine.

"I'm stronger. You'll soon learn that, Tate," replied Chasmer icily. "Isn't that the truth, Knowles?"

"Yes, suh. Yes, suh. Do like the boss says, Jedge." Grizzly Lew backed up his master.

"Of course, of course," agreed Tate hastily. "I only wanted you to savvy what you're buckin', suh. You understand I'm a legal light and not a rough-and-tumble husky like our friend the Grizzly. My specialty is brain work, Mr. Chasmer."

"Your specialty is legal chicanery," said Chasmer in his cold manner. "That's why I hunted you up. We're going to try apexing on Daly's mine holdings. You'll review the cases and preside. You know what I expect. You've accepted my money. I'll see to everything."

Judge Tate was nervous. He cleared his throat and asked timidly, "S'pose Marcus Daly won't lie down? He ain't the sort to pass in his checks without a scrap. What if he takes things into his own hands?"

"That will suit me to a T!" declared Chasmer. "I have a large fighting organization perfected here. Nobody will dare stand against me for long."

The Rio Kid listened with deep interest. He knew something about mining. Apexing had caused a deal of trouble around Butte. It was a legal device whereby an owner might claim the doubtful right of following up any ore vein surfacing on his property, following it through to its terminus no matter where it happened to go. Thus he could encroach on deposits under the staked holdings of others.

Lawsuits hatched like flies on a watermelon rind from this indefinite ruling. When the case came into the local courts a friendly judge might award an apexer anything he asked for. And an owner without sufficient financial backing to conduct a protracted struggle was often relieved to sell out at whatever low price was offered.

"Nothing to it," continued the banker. "I've bought claims not far from

Daly's chief mines. I'll charge that my apexing veins extend under his lands. I'll guarantee the cases will come up before you, Judge. You do the rest. It will give me the legal status necessary for full-scale seizure. If Daly starts anything outside the courtroom, so much the better. It will be easy with him out of the picture."

Chasmer had given his orders. A chair scraped as he rose. "We understand one another, Judge. From now on we won't appear too often together in public. I'll send Grizzly Lew after you any time I want you."

A short silence followed. There could be a double meaning in Chasmer's remark about sending Knowles for the judge. The magistrate was cemented to the banker not only through bribery but through fear.

"Yes, Mr. Chasmer. Thank you, suh," said Tate.

The corridor door opened and closed. Grizzly Lew had conducted Tate to the stairs but soon came back to his boss.

"Keep an eye on him, Knowles," ordered Chasmer. "I must make sure of him. He's a weak prop to depend on."

"Yes, suh." Grizzly Lew left the suite.

The Rio Kid waited. He could hear Chasmer whistling to himself as he moved around his rooms. The aromatic odor of a Cuban cheroot wafted from the open French window near which Pryor lay.

Bob Pryor had learned something about Chasmer's objectives in Butte. But there were gaps he was unable to fill.

"Where do the ranchers come in?" he wondered. Why had Si Kinny been slain, why was Chasmer sending Meathook's powerful bunch against Audley's A-1? The range was miles from the settlement where Chasmer squared off against the growing power of Marcus Daly.

After a while Chasmer turned down the lamps in his living room and went out. A key ground in the lock.

The Rio Kid gave him time to get downstairs. Butte was hitting it up, rollicking through the night. Pryor checked and then stepped into the room.

CHAPTER V

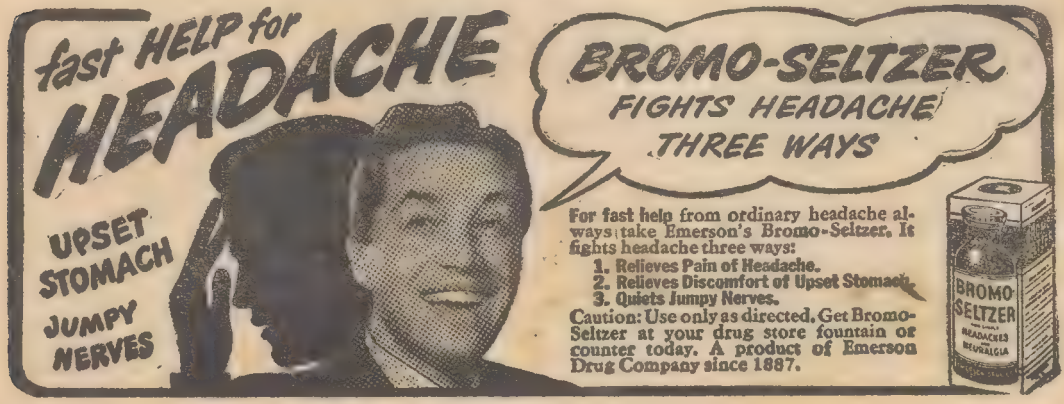
Warning

CHASMER'S A suite was well-furnished with a thick rug, furniture imported by bull team across mountain trails, pictures on the walls. Through an open connecting door the Rio Kid could see the four-poster bed and Chasmer's clothing neatly arranged on hooks.

He began a hurried search for documents which might assist him in fighting the banker who had come to take over Butte's incredible wealth. There was nothing much in the desk to interest him but in a leather case hidden under a bed pillow in the second room, Pryor found a sheaf of papers in neat handwriting, and a map made of the regions surrounding Butte.

A lamp burned low on the commode and beside it he began studying what he had uncovered. Here were Kinny's

[*Turn page*]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ranch, and Colonel Tex Audley's too, among others. It was all most intriguing and the Rio Kid grew too interested for his own safety. He had been at it about half an hour and was still in the bedroom when the parlor door was unlocked and flung open. Ichabod Chasmer came in, trailed by Meathook Jabe Torpy. Hastily the Rio Kid flattened himself on the far side of the bed. He could see under the white counterpane edges, see Chasmer's and Meathook's legs. They turned up the lamp and sat down.

The sleeping chamber's windows were small and to reach one Pryor would have to cross in full sight of his enemies. He decided to stay where he was and see what happened. If put to it he could jump up, fire and run for it.

"Have a drink, Torpy," said Chasmer. "I've talked with Judge Tate. He'll be all right if he isn't pressed too hard. Knowles is watching him."

"Yes, suh, things are comin' along fine," agreed Meathook. "I enlisted twenty more men this evenin'."

"We'll need them. I mean to brace Daly and have it over with. After that everything else will be simple. These two-bit ranchers such as Audley will be only a side issue."

"That's the stuff. What yuh expect to do about Daly?"

"Before I interviewed Tate tonight I intended to push him to the wall in Tate's court. If he bucked too hard I meant to send you after him. Now I've decided to get rid of Daly at once. That's up your alley. I want him seen to immediately."

"This evenin'?"

"Yes."

"I don't know as I can locate him."

"I've had him watched day and night since I arrived in Butte. He's dinin' at Ching Foo's on Silver Street. Go and kill him."

"Yes suh. I think yuh're right. With Daly gone his organization will fold up pronto." Liquor gurgled as Torpy drained his glass. "I'll pick up my boys and do the job."

Cold sweat prickled the Rio Kid's flesh. Marcus Daly was the most prominent citizen of Butte, one of the best. Chasmer had just ordered Daly's death and the victim had not the slightest warning that killers were going after him.

Meathook Jabe went out. Pryor felt desperately impelled by the necessity of saving Daly. But Chasmer was still there. He was about to run for the window, no matter what, when the investment banker turned down the lamp and went out, locking the door.

Within a couple of minutes the Rio Kid found Yellowstone Kelly waiting faithfully around the turn.

"Didn't hear any fuss so I kept quiet," said Yellowstone.

"Come on, Yellowstone! Tell Celestino to get the horses saddled. The three of yuh meet me at the corner of Silver and Montana as soon as yuh can make it. Fetch a spare mount and a couple of double-barreled shotguns. Meathook Torpy's on his way to Ching Foo's to kill Marcus Daly and I aim to stop it."

Kelly whistled. He was already on his way, however. The Rio Kid went down the back stairs and reached the street through a side passage. Montana Street was crowded with saddled horses and vehicles waiting at the racks or passing through. Miners, cowboys and citizens were on the wooden sidewalks. Music came from many sources, with the voices of men and women. Lights burned in the lamps at corners but the awnings cast shadows.

SILVER Street was three blocks north of the Grand. The Rio Kid hurried up the line, an eye peeled for Meathook Torpy and his self-styled vigilantes. He hoped he had a few spare breaths in which to warn Marcus Daly.

But as he neared the intersection of Silver and Montana he spied the stoutish outlaw chief dodging through the traffic, a dozen men trailing him. Torpy ducked under the hitchrail and went swiftly down the side way.

Pryor trotted to the corner. A hundred yards down Silver he saw a sign lit by oil lamps marking the Chinese restaurant, "Ching Foo's." Torpy and his bunch were between the Rio Kid and Daly. Meathook had picked up what he considered plenty of gunhands for this job, had not wasted any time hunting them all in the town.

The Rio Kid felt his Colts, the only weapons he had on him. He carried two spares inside his shirt as a precaution, as did many Indian fighters and hunters. Pryor kept going, close to the buildings. Meathook Jabe stopped

just before reaching Ching Foo's and sent four men down the dark passage alongside the wooden structure. He kept four with him and sent the other men to the far wing. Torpy waited a minute or two on the sidewalk with his contingent, then entered the restaurant by the main door.

The Rio Kid glanced back, and Yellowstone Kelly, Liver-Eating Johnson at his side, swung the turn from Montana. In the street came Celestino Mireles, the reins of five saddled horses in his hand.

They saw their friend against the light as he waved them in, ran swiftly to his side. "Meathook's already in, with twelve gunslingers! Let's go."

Mireles was up. "Let me fight, General!"

"*Si.* Drop those reins and hop to it."

Liver-Eating Johnson thrust a sawed-off shotgun into Pryor's hands. Celestino hastily looped the bunched leathers over the rail. Music and the hum of voices issued from the popular eating place.

There was no time for subtle maneuvering and the Rio Kid pushed through the wide entry.

Windows gave out on both wings, silken curtains rustling. The Chinaman's was furnished in heavy Oriental style, with rich hangings, vases and other Chinese art about, the fittings having been freighted across the mountains from San Francisco. Ching Foo specialized in the dishes of his own land and did a rushing trade. Chinese padded silently back and forth, serving the diners.

The Rio Kid and his wolf hunters paused. Meathook Jabe was halfway down the long central aisle. A waiter hurried up.

"No table, wait leetle, sir-r."

"Where's Marcus Daly?" demanded the Rio Kid.

"He's in back, to your left," spoke up Kelly.

"Yess, yess!" The head waiter bobbed. "Misser Daly eat."

At a rear side table sat a man in a black suit, white shirt and silk stock, a genial grin on his Irish face. A Butte political light sat across from Marcus Daly, who had not the slightest inkling that he was being stalked. Torpy, closely followed by his armed retainers, inexorably approached.

The Rio Kid had to make a flash decision. If he sang out to Daly it might cause Meathook's killers to open fire. If lead began flying women and innocent bystanders might be hurt. To make matters worse he must contend with the enemy groups outside. He did not believe that Meathook Torpy would actually drill Daly in plain sight of so many witnesses. Rather, the stoutish vigilante chief would point out the target to his drygulchers.

"Celestino, cover the left. Johnson, the right, and keep those windows clean, savvy? Yellowstone, we're goin' to run Daly out. Watch yore aim, there's womenfolk in here."

He was moving. Four tall gunslingers behind Meathook almost hid him from the Rio Kid. Torpy's steel hook arm rose, glinting in the shaded lamplight.

"Meathook!" roared the Rio Kid. He guessed that his foe was about to signal his outside marksmen to shoot Marcus Daly.

The Rio Kid's voice filled the big room and everybody turned to stare. Torpy jumped, swinging to face the wolf hunter's challenge. Mireles's carbine spat. A slug ripped a window close to Daly's table as Celestino sighted a Torpy gunhand about to make a shot from the alley. A pistol exploded outside but the lead was high due to the Mexican's quick action.

Women screamed. Ching Foo, a fat Chinese in soft silken robes, jumped from the cashier's desk and began angrily squealing for the city marshals. The Rio Kid dared not aim low for fear of hitting diners. One of his bullets glanced from Meathook's steel hook, shocked Torpy. Meathook and his quartet swung their guns on the advancing Rio Kid.

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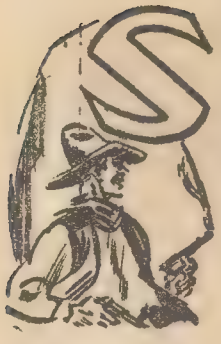
CHAPTER VI

The Run



SCREAMS and a bawling fury joined the roaring guns in Ching Foo's. Liver-Eating Johnson and Mireles had a fairly clean sweep to the side windows and were firing steadily. The Rio Kid and Yellowstone Kelly fearlessly charged straight at Meathook.

The four gunhands were in a solid bunch between Pryor and their stout leader. The sawed-off shotgun would team them to shreds at close range. Meathook was stunned by the surprise counter of the wolf hunters, rattled by the Rio Kid's strike on his steel arm. Yellowstone Kelly's Colt snapped and one of Torpy's sharpshooters, whose pistol was up and cocked, staggered back against Meathook. It was close shooting. People were jumping up, running about in circles, some diving under tables for safety.

Meathook Jabe turned and rushed to a service door, only a few jumps away. His gunhands lost their nerve and hurried after him, the wounded one biting his lip as he tightly gripped his punctured right shoulder.

A missile from a window opposite missed Marcus Daly by a couple of inches as it cut into the wall through a silk tapestry. Liver-Eating Johnson poured lead through the opening and a sharp screech could be heard over the general din.

Meathook Jabe was out of sight. The Rio Kid swerved, calling to Daly: "Mr. Daly! Duck, this way, pronto. They're after yuh."

Daly was quick of comprehension. He had noticed the concentration of the fire and heard the savage whine of bullets hunting his vitals. He rolled off his chair, a hand thrusting under his jacket. It came out gripping a short-nosed Colt and Daly watched the Rio Kid, obeyed as Pryor pointed to the nearest exit, the service portal through which Meathook and his four had disappeared.

A panic-stricken diner bumped into the Rio Kid and knocked him sideways but Pryor kept going. He was right behind Daly as the mining king reached the comparative safety of the pantry. The Rio Kid turned and waved Johnson and Mireles back, the two friends swiftly leaving by the front door.

"What's all this, sir?" cried Daly as the Rio Kid stepped by him, the shotgun ready in case Meathook should be waiting.

"We'll tell yuh outside, Daly. It was a plot to drygulch yuh tonight. Come on, we've got to hustle."

Yellowstone Kelly was slightly acquainted with Daly and smiled at him. "This is the Rio Kid, suh," corroborated Kelly. "Yuh can ride the river with him."

In the spacious kitchens the Chinese cooks by their hot stoves had been alarmed at the ruckus and the galloping passage of the gunhands. They had grabbed cleavers and butcher knives, backs to the wall as they shrilly jabbered in their native dialect.

Doors were open to the rear and both wings. Sandwiched between Yellowstone Kelly and the Rio Kid, Marcus Daly was bundled out.

"Our horses are on Silver Street," said the Rio Kid.

Shadows bobbed up in the back yard. The Rio Kid threw up the shotgun and pulled a trigger. The spreading buck whoosed in the night air and a wild pistol shot went over their heads. Meathook and his boys were beaten off, appalled by the swift strike of the wolf hunters. A shrill, insistent whistle kept giving triple blasts.

"General—zis way," shouted Mireles, who had padded around and helped clean that passage. Torpy's killers, seeing their leader on the run, had made for the rear to join Meathook.

In a few breaths they joined Celestino and found that Liver-Eating Johnson had the horses' reins untangled and ready.

Ching Foo's was filled with milling diners. The fight had lasted but a short interval although it had seemed much longer as it unfolded. The Rio Kid was greatly relieved to find Daly and his comrades safe and sound, and no patrons hurt in the restaurant.

"What now?" inquired Marcus Daly. His white teeth gleamed in a smile.

MARCUS DALY
(1841—1900)

MARCUS DALY was an immigrant from Ireland, landing in the U. S. at the age of fifteen with "nothing in his pockets save his Irish smile!" From New York he hurried to California, drawn by the excitement at the mines. He wielded a pick and shovel, and was sent to Nevada by Fair and Mackay. Later he tried Butte, Montana. When a silver lode petered out Daly hit the huge copper lode which still seems inexhaustible. Quietly he bought up all the land he could in the vicinity and the Anaconda Copper mine grew famous. Daly also secured coal deposits for his furnaces, timber to shore his miles of mine tunnels, land for a railroad from Butte to the Anaconda. He ran his few dollars into millions.

Genial and generous, Marcus Daly was a power in the West. He built great ranches in the upper Bitter Root Valley and prospered with his organization until his death in 1900, one of our scintillating mining kings.

"I'm mighty grateful to you boys."

"Let's ride off a ways where we can spiel," suggested the Rio Kid. "I don't cotton to this neighborhood."

DALY nodded. He mounted the spare mustang they had brought along and they started east on Silver Street. They kept hearing, over Butte's general hum, that insistent, blasting whistle. It would sound three short ones, pause, then three more. "That's a signal, boys," Pryor remarked. "Meathook's in command of a real army here in Butte. I reckon he's regrettin' he didn't fetch 'em all along to Ching Foo's."

Marcus Daly rode beside the Rio Kid, who was on Saber. Then came Mireles and Johnson, Yellowstone a few hops behind. Kelly was watching back over his shoulder. "Here they come, Rio Kid!" he sang out.

Pryor glanced around. A bunch of riders were swinging the corner from Montana Street. They sighted the five ahead and began shouting to others. Guns were fired in the air and slugs whistled over the wolf hunters and the man they had snatched from death. As

they made the next corner, Dakota Street, a second pack of horsemen came pelting up the narrow, dusty block. They could hear the signals of their friends around the turn.

"We ain't out of this yet, gents," drawled Yellowstone Kelly.

The whistle would not cease. "That's Torpy callin' out every fighter he has," said the Rio Kid.

They sent quick shots along Dakota, drawing replies. At increasing speed they passed the intersection, staying on Silver. The two bands of pursuers joined forces. But the snarling guns of the hunters kept them from pressing too close. They were traveling east, crossed Colorado and at the Rio Kid's order, turned up Main, northbound, fighting their persistent foes as they retreated.

More and more of Meathook's vigilantes were tearing up to get in the scrap. As the lines of mounted enemies passed shafts of light from oil-burning street lamps the fugitives saw that Meathook Jabe and Grizzly Lew Knowles had picked up horses and were commanding the procession.

"I hate parades," remarked Liver-Eating Johnson. "Butte ain't healthy tonight, boys. I crave mountain air."

They all agreed as to that. "Wish I could get in touch with my mine bosses," said Marcus Daly. "They'd give us the help we need."

"First we got to shake these cusses," said the Rio Kid. "We'll never do it in town. Torpy holds Butte for the time bein'."

They passed Quartz Street and the town lights petered out. In the darkness vague piles marked ore dumps with a log cabin or a shaft head here and there. They kept climbing the steep ways out of the valley. Meathook made a determined attempt to check them, urging his killers to rush. There was a hot skirmish as the hunters beat back the advance and kept going.

"Where to?" inquired Daly.

"How about Audley's A-1? We can catch our breath and send out a call to your pards, Daly," suggested the Rio Kid.

"Suits me," shrugged Daly. "I'm lucky to be alive and kickin'."

The road was rocky and narrow over the humps. Stars and a chunky moon offered light as they picked along the trails. Meathook Jabe and his band kept after them and they sighted Audley's ranch lights before Torpy called off the chase.

Mike Reed was on sentry duty and challenged from the dark side of the barn. He passed the five dusty, tired riders through as they identified themselves and soon they were inside the house, Colonel Tex Audley greeting them.

Drinks and a bite to eat were in order. Harriet and Mrs. Audley set about preparing a snack. Si Kinny's widow and children were staying at the A-1 with their friends.

The Rio Kid quickly brought Colonel Audley and Mike Reed up to date on the fight against Chasmer. Marcus Daly listened with the deepest interest.

"I know this Chasmer," he said with a nod. "He's an investment banker, specializes in minin' stocks, from the West Coast. Aggressive cuss. He was among that bunch of pirates who tried to snatch Comstock Lode not long back."

"And Meathook Jabe is his local field chief," continued the Rio Kid. "They operate as vigilantes but they're real outlaws. We been spyin' on Chasmer. He bribed Judge Tate, Mr. Daly. They aim to try apexin' on yuh and Tate will rule in Chasmer's favor."

TURNING red Daly sputtered in anger. "I see. Tate's an old reprobate."

"Chasmer decided it would be a lot easier with yuh out of the picture so he gave Meathook orders to kill yuh. I was listenin' at the time. It was a close squeak beatin' Torpy to the punch, suh."

"How did you happen to be watchin' Chasmer?" asked Daly.

Pryor gave the magnate the details of Kinny's and Ag Norris' deaths, how Mike Reed had been saved in the woods near the mountain park and the ranch defended against Torpy's first attack.

"My first notion was there must be gold or silver around here, that Chasmer was after," the Rio Kid said. "But this evenin' while Chasmer stepped out I got in among his papers and maps. From what I could make out there's coal deposits runnin' through Audley's and Kinny's holdin's. Timber and water were marked, I believe. And Chasmer

had crisscrosses like railroad tracks on his charts."

Marcus Daly's broad Irish face was knitted in a frown. For a while he did not speak, then he nodded and hooked a thumb under his armpit.

"Boys, I'm goin' to tell you a story. You've earned the right to it. I landed in the United States, a raw Irish kid with not two bits in my pockets. I had heard of the gold lyin' around loose in California and hurried across the continent. It was pick-and-shovel for me, then Fair and Mackey shipped me to the Comstock. I had to fight my way every step up that I made and I learned two things. One was to keep my trap shut. The other was that you must treat men fair-and-square if you want to sleep sound of nights.

"I saw my chance in Butte. First off it was gold and silver which fetched men here. But there's somethin' else makes Butte the biggest thing yet for my money. It's not a precious metal like gold but it's a sight more useful. Telegraph wires, railroads, all the big industries need it. Under Butte is the largest, richest copper lode ever discovered."

They listened with bated breath as Marcus Daly spoke.

"Chasmer's after that," said Pryor.

"That's the answer. I've paid fair prices for what I've bought up. Coal is needed for smelters and refineries, for fuel. Water, plenty of it, is vital. Timber must be available to shore the mines. The railroad requires land for right-of-way and soon the trains will boom Butte, fetchin' in produce and supplies, carryin' out our metal."

"Chasmer is tryin' to get rid of Audley, so he can seize the coal and timber," declared the Rio Kid. "They're valuable sidelines in his master plan to take over Butte."

"You've hit it," cried Daly. "Cattle for beef and work horses are worth plenty, too. They say Ike Chasmer never pays for anything he can grab. I finance my projects through San Francisco, the bankin' center for the western mines. There's been the usual leak. Chasmer got wind of my plans and here he is on deck."

"We must curb Chasmer pronto before he does more damage and strengthens his hand," said the Rio Kid. "Daly, how many fighters can yuh furnish? We're in the game and so's the colonel and his boys, that goes without sayin'. But Meathook and Grizzly Lew are hirin' gunhands in droves for the big push."

"I have plenty of loyal men," answered Daly. "But not too many in Butte itself. Many are twenty to fifty miles away, at outlyin' mines. It will take a little time to bring them in. But I know the mayor, and George Rucker, the chief city marshal, is a close friend of mine. I think we should head for Rucker's office."

"Meathook will be watchin' the roads for us," nodded Pryor. "We may have to make a rush for police headquarters where we'll have a chance to catch our breath and sound the alarm."

All agreed it would be best to drive through to Marshal Rucker's. There Daly could enlist the local law and begin the counter against Chasmer's forces.

They were weary and after Colonel Audley had posted two cowboy guards, they turned in to sleep. . . .

NEXT day, born in cool grayness stealing over the crags of the mountains, promised to be a fair one. The A-1 was stirring at dawn and before the sun stained the east horizon, the wolf hunters, Mike Reed and Marcus Daly started on the rough climb across the intervening rises to Butte.

Tex Audley, his sons, plus eight cowboys, half of them from the Kinny place, remained to guard the A-1. They dared not leave it so undermanned that the "vigilantes" could easily rush and capture it.

Celestino Mireles rode well ahead, his hawk eyes sweeping the trail for any warnings. Liver-Eating Johnson held down the rear. Yellowstone Kelly, Mike Reed, then the Rio Kid and Marcus Daly, were in between.

"George Rucker's a fine hombre," said Daly. "Wait till he hears what's goin' on! He'll raise the roof in Butte. He has a list of honest men he swears in as deputies in a pinch. Even if Meathook Jabe spies us we can race for the marshal's office and hold out there easily enough till help comes."

"I figger we ought to go into town by a roundabout trail, suh," suggested the Rio Kid. "We might be able to avoid the rascals watchin' the in-roads.

They'll think we'll come from this direction."

They spent two hours in detouring so they might reach Butte from the southeast in the hope of outwitting spying vigilantes. Meathook Jabe knew they had holed up at the A-1. The sun was glorious in the sky, red at first, then turning a hot yellow as it climbed.

The six allies were most cautious as they guided their mustangs onto Front Street, which ran along Silver Bow Creek into the center. A fresh-inked poster glared at them from a board wall and the Rio Kid swung Saber over to read it.

"Look at this, boys!" he called.

It was a "vigilante" warning: A crude skull-and-bones in one top corner, across from it a hangman's noose. "Wanted for Killing & Robbery. The Rio Kid, Yellowstone Kelly, Reed, Johnson, Unknown Mexican! Stay out of Butte or BEWARE!" The usual signature, "3-7-77" filled in at the bottom of the poster.

CHAPTER VII

Strike

PURPLE with rage, Marcus Daly reddened and choked on his own tongue as he read the insolent threat.

"Vigilantes! Why, they're the worst type of outlaws and have stolen a name decent hombres sometimes operate under in a pinch! We'll organize a Committee of Public Safety and give Meathook Jabe and his bunch what they're ripe for. I've heard rumors of this band of bullies. Now I savvy 'em for fair I'll guarantee to smash 'em."

The warm sun had dispelled the night mists. Silver Bow Creek ran low at this season. Water was scarce for commercial purposes.

"Funny color there," remarked the Rio Kid, pointing at a byway pool of intense blue.

"Copper salts cause it," nodded Daly. "Incidentally, Rio Kid, from what I saw of our friend Colonel Audley's land, there's a fine site for a dam south of his home, a dam to serve Butte. I guess Chasmer must have noticed it, too. That's another item helping make that cattle range worth a fortune."

Men were digging in the surrounding mines. Trade had commenced as the day was now well along. They were cautious as they turned corners, making for police headquarters which was situated in a thick-walled structure of the central square.

As they made the swing into Montana Street at its south terminus they saw another warning poster nailed to a saloon door. As they proceeded several more cropped up on fences or building walls. The roads were bustling with activity. Riders, miners' wives out shopping with their young ones, people cleaning up after the night before, storekeepers, hunters and traders, thronged the streets.

Wagons and other vehicles rattled along the uneven, rutted ways or stood at the rails. Men went about their own affairs, each occupied by his little universe which no other could enter. They sought for points of contact, for one reason or another, seeking to understand, to be understood. Clashes between egos were common in such a spot for all went armed and chiefly adventurous spirits had been drawn to this Frontier settlement.

Mireles gave a thin whistle and waved a brown hand. The Rio Kid and his comrades made ready as they received the advance man's warning. Following Celestino's gesture, Pryor looked up the line and saw a couple of leather-clad toughs, bearded and heavily armed, quickly leave the shade of a saloon porch and hurry across the road.

"Those are Meathook's watchers," he told Daly. "We're spotted, Pick it up."

They were within a hundred yards of the city marshal's offices when that insistent whistle began to blast, three short ones, a pause, then three more.

"That's Torpy callin' his vigilantes," growled the Rio Kid. They had heard the signal the night before as they shot their way out of Butte with Daly.

"Never mind," cried Daly. "We're safe and sound, gents. George Rucker will support us and we'll run the rascals out of Butte."

The door into the offices stood wide open, inviting. A low wall made of na-

LUTHER S. "YELLOWSTONE" KELLY

(1849—1928)

YOUNG and strong, with an eye like an eagle's, supple as a panther, reliable, enterprising and fearless, Yellowstone Kelly, who was known as the "little man with the big heart," served as an Army scout and pioneer in Montana and the upper Missouri country.

Born in Geneva, N. Y., Kelly enlisted at 14 in the Union Army. After the Civil War ended he was shipped West and on being discharged he roamed the Yellowstone region as a hunter, trapper, guide and dispatch bearer. He guided Gen. George (Sandy) Forsyth, of Beecher Island fame, on the upper Missouri and Yellowstone and scouted for Gen. Nelson A. Miles against Sitting Bull and other Sioux and Cheyenne chiefs.

Later in life Kelly served in the War Department. Then he went to Alaska and the Philippines. He was an Indian agent in Arizona and had many exciting adventures. He died in 1928 after the publication of his book, "Yellowstone Kelly."

tive rock extended out from the building, making a small three-sided enclosure with the whitewashed log wall to the rear. On their right as they hastily rode up showed two barred windows, which marked the cell-block.

Marcus Daly jumped off the brown mustang he had ridden from the A-1, and ran into the office, the Rio Kid dropping Saber's rein and following close after the copper king. Pryor turned as he entered the doorway, pausing a moment to call to his hunters.

"Stay outside and watch the horses, boys. Keep yore eyes peeled!"

Yellowstone Kelly, Mike Reed, Mireles and Johnson dismounted, standing by, facing out and observing the enemy movements. Armed men were collecting up the line near the Grand Hotel. They were Torpy's gunhands, and joining them came running miners, commanded by Grizzly Lew Knowles. The yellow sunlight flashed on Meathook Jabe's steel arm as the field chief waved orders to his men.

AT A desk facing the open door sat a man with matted black hair which started its growth an inch above his hard black eyes. He wore a mustache and beard. Across the desk lay a double-barreled shotgun while at his hips were six-shooters holstered in brown, oiled pouches. The belts supporting his sidearms were crossed over a hairy chest, the loops filled with cartridges. Broken veins distinguished his swollen nose and the thin lips between the tobacco-stained beard gave a rat-trap impression.

The instant the Rio Kid saw this worthy, who had a plated badge pinned to his stained brown shirt, he knew something had gone sour. While he had not before encountered the fellow behind the marshal's desk, he was a quick judge of character.

"Where's Marshal Rucker?" demanded Marcus Daly.

"He's gone to Virginia City," replied the officer. "Won't be back till next week, he said. I'm in charge, his deputy, Mr. Daly."

"You know me, but I don't know you," said Daly. "What's your handle?"

"Hanson."

Through a connecting door the Rio Kid saw half a dozen armed men coming from the rear quarters. He stepped back to the exit, all his faculties alert, warning in his soul.

Marcus Daly decided to throw all his aces on the table. "There's trouble in Butte, Marshal Hanson. An attempt to kill me was made last night by Meathook Jabe Torpy and a passel of gunslingers posin' as vigilantes in these parts. I want help, every man you can muster at once. They've seen us and are comin' now. I have friends with me, the Rio Kid, this gent. Outside are Mike Reed, Yellowstone Kelly, and a couple more. There's no time to waste."

Deputy Hanson kept his place, his body tense. "I have warrants for the arrest of the Rio Kid, Yellowstone Kelly, Liver-Eating Johnson, Mike Reed and an unknown Mexican, Mr. Daly. They're wanted for killin's and for highway robbery."

Marcus Daly jumped violently. "Are you loco?" he shrieked. "Torpy and his bunch are the bandits, not the Rio Kid and his mates. I'll hang your hide on the fence to dry if you refuse me aid, Hanson. George Rucker's my friend and I have plenty more of the same in Butte. Order your deputies to open fire on those gunhands if they come any closer."

The Rio Kid already knew that Marcus Daly had made a miscalculation which might prove fatal. The triple whistle blasts still excitedly summoned the enemy forces. Minutes, even seconds could spell the difference between life and death.

"Hold it, Marshal!" snapped the Rio Kid. Hanson's forearm had slid across the desk close to the loaded shotgun.

The Rio Kid's Colt had jumped into sight with the speed of legerdemain and pinned Hanson, who froze in his chair, staring at the set face of Bob Pryor.

"Here they come, a hundred of 'em, Rio Kid," warned Yellowstone Kelly from the yard entry. "How about it?"

Had Rucker and men they could depend upon been on deck the Rio Kid would have gone through with the original plan to hold the fort till decent elements arrived. But Hanson was plainly planted, watching for them. Somehow Ichabod Chasmer had managed to send Rucker away, perhaps by means of a forged message.

The retainers from the back room were at the connecting door. "I'll drill the first man who steps over the line," warned the determined Rio Kid. "We better get out of here, Daly!"

Marcus Daly was beside himself with rage. He gave a hoarse war cry and drawing back his fist, planted a terrific punch square in Hanson's bearded face, The force of it, all Daly's weight behind the blow, knocked the deputy backward and upset his chair, sprawling him on the floor.

"Duck!" cried the Rio Kid.

Daly caught himself in the nick of time. He had moved between Pryor's Colt muzzle and the toughs in the back chamber. The Rio Kid got off a shot and hit one man who was aiming at Daly. The gunhand screamed and staggered back, bumping into his friends.

"Rio Kid! We can't stick here any longer," warned Yellowstone Kelly. "Either we move or get inside."

LONG shots were cracking from the north side as Meathook Jabe, Grizzly Lew and other vigilante leaders urged their faction along Montana to-

ward the jail. Bullets were striking the wall or kicking up spurts of dirt in the yard.

A slug from the roughs to Hanson's rear bit a piece of felt from the Rio Kid's Stetson. He lunged forward and seizing Hanson's shotgun, threw it up and pulled a trigger. Spreading buck patterned the rectangle of the doorway and it cleared as if by magic as chunks of metal cut flesh or whistled close to the bunched figures.

The Rio Kid seized Marcus Daly by the arm and thrust him toward the exit. "Get on yore horse and ride for it," he shouted.

Hanson dared not go for his Colts. He cowered there behind the desk, his teeth rattling as he begged for mercy.

"Don't kill me, Rio Kid! Don't kill me!"

The wolf hunters crouched along the wall wings extending from the building and were firing to slow Torpy's advance. Their bullets persuaded the overwhelming army to swerve and some scattered for cover. But Meathook Jabe was coming on the west side while Grizzly Lew, urging along miners in corduroy and caps, was working down the other. Soon the jail would be circled.

"Hit leather, boys," roared the Rio Kid, finding the immediate situation even worse than he had anticipated, with lines of armed foes running to pin them. "Tie yore hats to the saddle and let's set sail!"

Up the way he spied Torpy's stoutish figure, pistol in his meat hand, waving his terrible metal hook. Torpy had a pea-whistle between his lips and was blowing it in the vigilante signal call.

A knot of bolder enemies rushed straight at them as they jumped into their hulls. The Rio Kid pulled the second trigger of the shotgun, spraying them with buck, hurling the weapon at them as it was empty. He drew a Colt and began peppering at the menacing mob. A dull but hostile and menacing sound came from the approaching crowd, growling threats, the thud of booted, spurred or hobnailed feet. Challenges were shouted at the Rio Kid and his handful of friends, at Marcus Daly who was struck dumb as he watched the lynchers' approach.

"Halt in the name of the vigilantes!" bellowed Meathook Jabe.

The Rio Kid's reply was a pistol bullet which even at the long range only missed by a hair. Torpy dropped to one knee and fired. Slugs were beginning to hail around the lockup and marshal's quarters as the wolf hunters swung their mounts and sped off.

South was the only way they could make it and that was a close shave. A number of Torpy's followers had hurried down adjoining roads on horseback, to cut them off. Shooting at the ravening mob, the fugitives began bumping into small bands of riders emerging from cross ways.

They fought to Front Street, with Silver Bow Creek beyond. Torpy was coming, and many more had grabbed mustangs to pursue.

"Take the left side of the road, Johnson," called the Rio Kid. "Reed and Daly, with him. Celestino and Yellowstone, keep with me." The first three veered over to clean streets merging with Front. The Rio Kid, Mireles and Kelly lay back to snap at the roaring, furious main bands on their heels.

The rear guard had their hands full. The Rio Kid would ride a few jumps, turn and empty a gun, move on a bit, reloading as he was forced along by Torpy's powerful forces. Dust and powder smoke rose in Butte and noncombatants ducked for cover.

Heavy gunfire exploded and the Rio Kid, sparing a swift glance up Front, saw that his three friends there were engaged with a section of the enemy which had driven from a north-to-south road. Mike Reed, Marcus Daly and Liver-Eating Johnson recoiled, dust billowing as their horses scraped dirt. Confused yells of fighting men joined in the general din.

The Rio Kid was fully occupied trying to slow Meathook Jabe. He started up to assist the three ahead but a dozen mounted toughs debouched from a narrow lane and came out on Front between the Rio Kid and the leading hunters.

"We're cut off, Yellowstone," shouted Bob Pryor, for more and more pushed through the unguarded lane. "Daly, Reed, Johnson! Cross the creek!" He put all his lung power into the bellowing command he hoped would penetrate to his friends.

Squeezed between Torpy and the swelling pack only a block away, already feeling the enemy crossfire, the

Rio Kid had but one course to avoid certain capture and death. He waved Mireles and Yellowstone Kelly toward the stream.

CHAPTER VIII

Missing

LIKE a flash the Rio Kid, Kelly and the Mexican ripped their horses around and spurted over rocky, loose soil in which grew patches of low brush. Glancing to his left Bob Pryor sighted Mike Reed and Liver-Eating Johnson also headed for the tall timber beyond Silver Bow Creek.

The enemy guns vastly outnumbered the wolf hunters and only the fleetness of their mounts could save them. The dust and fury rose in south Butte as Meathook Jabe closed in for the kill. The steep bank crumbled under Saber's braced hoofs as the dun with the black stripe down his back, snorting in the joy and excitement of battle, stiffened his legs to slide. It was necessary to hold a tight rein and help the dun avoid the soft spots. Saber splashed into the shallows, sank in sand, then recovered and forged on.

When the Rio Kid could again glance around to see how his partners were faring, he was halfway across Silver Bow, pushing for the south shore. On his right Yellowstone and Celestino were in the water, firing with their pistols back at gunslingers driving down from Front Street. Left, Mike Reed and Liver-Eating Johnson were just descending the bank. Meathook's mounted retainers had spread into a wide line and were roaring in triumph on the trail.

"Where's Marcus Daly!" The Rio Kid had lost sight of Daly in the sudden, vicious thrust made on the running hunters' flank. He kept looking eastward and was relieved as Reed and Johnson safely crossed the creek but there was no sign of Daly. The whooping, victorious foe swept to the north bank, billows of dust clouding the lower air.

Over the Silver Bow, they were still not out of it. Hardly any proper cover existed, only outcroppings of dull red or gray rocks and low brush patches which would not stop lead. They had to keep going as Meathook Jabe and his lieutenants urged the vigilantes to the crossing and came on, foaming at the mouth for the capture. Even if taken alive, the Rio Kid and his wolf hunters would not last long. Chasmer would see to it they were quickly lynched, out of his way. They were dangerous witnesses against him, against his men.

It was dangerous and dreary, the retreat from Butte. They were too close for comfort, missiles flying after them as the five superb riders galloped over uneven ground for the rising south escarpment of the valley. Fortunately they were all on animals greatly superior to the run-of-the-mill mustang and they steadily gained until only a lucky shot on the part of their pursuers could make a hit.

In the bright sunlight speed was the answer. Marcus Daly's fate gnawed at the Rio Kid's soul. He savagely snarled back at the baying killer pack, Colt hot in his hand. No hope remained that Daly might streak out to join him. The enemy had long since swept the area where Daly had last been spied. An attempt to stand and crash back through Chasmer's armed might could mean but one thing; death. Either Daly was done for, killed or captured, or had somehow managed to flee in another direction. Much as he hated leaving Butte without being certain of Daly's lot, the Rio Kid had to face the facts. In battles during the Civil War he had had to accept the loss of close comrades in the same way.

They were climbing all the time, foam coming out on the laboring horses. The Mexican rode with the grace of a centaur, his white teeth gleaming under his hawk nose as he bravely fought through. Liver-Eating Johnson and Mike Reed, a couple of hundred yards to the eastward, were doggedly defending themselves while Yellowstone Kelly, a veteran of many struggles against organized soldiers and the cut-throat Sioux, had his own light-hearted style. Men differed in the way they behaved in action, as the Rio Kid well knew. Some were sullen, some in hot, cursing fury, others laughed or just smiled as

they concentrated on the dirty job they must do.

Here and there one of Meathook Jabe's bunch would gouge and quirt his horse out in front of the ragged main line, hoarsely bellowing as he sought to overtake the wolf hunters. Then the Rio Kid or another of the quintet would take aim and the shrieking lead would cool some of the vigilante's ardor.

BY THE time they reached the crest south of Silver Bow valley the five were near enough to call to each other as they ran for it. They were picking up yard by yard and once over the hump hit a rocky trail southwest into the rugged mountains. Here and there could be seen abandoned placer claims where men had dug with high hopes of striking it rich overnight. By back-breaking toil they had lugged water up the steep slopes to the sites or else trundled the crushed ore down to the stream. But Butte had not surrendered much gold. As Marcus Daly had told them it was copper which made the district so incredibly valuable.

The Rio Kid held the position of the most danger, the rear. Ahead rode Mike Reed, his face coated with sweated dust, and stained with blood welling from an ear lobe clipped by a slug. Bullets had ventilated the Stetsons and clothing of the wolf hunters but they had managed to come off with no serious wounds.

"What happened to Marcus Daly, Mike?" shouted the Rio Kid.

"I don't know," answered Reed. "He was down the road from me. I had to face a passel of Torpy's gunhands and when I looked around again, Daly was gone."

"Did yuh see him or his horse go down?"

Reed shook his head. Banging guns interfered with their hearing.

The Rio Kid signaled Liver-Eating Johnson, who had been with Daly and Reed. Johnson exchanged places with Reed. But he knew no more than the other hunter about Marcus Daly. He had been too busy fighting free in the crush.

For mile after mile, over the rough branching trails, Meathook Jabe and his vigilantes stuck on the wolf hunters. But the fugitives gained more and more and reaching a heavily wooded area, plunged into the forests. The run had slowed to a trot, then to a walk for the horses could not maintain such a hectic speed forever.

The gunfire had ceased. Keeping close together the five zigzagged through the deep-shadowed woods, lodgepole pines towering overhead, their lower branches brown and dead. The underfooting was carpeted by the droppings of centuries. Bird calls and other natural sounds, the creak of their saddle leather and an occasional click as a shod hoof struck a hidden stone, broke the primeval quiet.

Their relief at escaping the trap in Butte laid for them by Ichabod Chasmer's agents was damped by the loss of their friend Marcus Daly. Depression showed in the bronzed faces of the wolf hunters.

The Rio Kid, as chief of it all, felt the deepest responsibility. "I should never have ridden into town that way, boys," he growled, blaming himself for Daly's fate. He rolled a quirly and lighted up, moving slowly along.

"I'll go back and see if they're still comin'," offered Yellowstone Kelly.

The Rio Kid nodded. They were safe enough for the moment. Pryor realized that Chasmer and Torpy had been a jump ahead of him when they had substituted one of their agents for Marshal George Rucker. They had figured that Daly and Audley, the faction opposing them around Butte, would appeal to the law.

Beyond the personal sorrow he felt was the realization that without the copper king they stood little chance of getting enough help in time to check Chasmer. It might take days, even weeks, to raise the armed forces of men who could be trusted to fight Chasmer and the vigilantes. Butte was close at hand but undoubtedly the center would be carefully watched, day and night, by the toughs. Propaganda against the Rio Kid, against Colonel Tex Audley, was already being spread in Butte. Unless the most conclusive proof could be furnished, decent men would hesitate about throwing themselves into such a struggle.

"It's a cinch Audley can't supply enough fighters," said the Rio Kid as he voiced his thoughts to his friends. "He'll be lucky if he can hold his ranch once Meathook and Grizzly Lew really

go to work on him. We're in a nasty fix, boys."

YELLOWSTONE KELLY could be seen weaving back through the trees. He signaled and came up. "All clear. They've turned back to Butte."

"Rest the horses."

They got down, and stretched their legs, smoking as they held a conclave. Nobody had any bright ideas. Stopping Ike Chasmer loomed as a tremendous task. Within a couple of days, perhaps in hours, Chasmer would have disposed of his chief enemies. Daly and Audley strung up with the 3-7-77 signs on them, with Judge Tate signing what legal documents the predatory raider ordered, Butte would fall into Chasmer's clutches. "We could work around through the mountains and make the A-1 before night," suggested Mike Reed. "I hate to think of 'em out there, waitin' for another attack."

The Rio Kid shook his head. "We can't just sit on our hunkers and let Chasmer make the attack when and where it suits him. Grizzly Lew Knowles is a minin' expert, for one thing. He savvies explosives. A few can bombs of blastin' powder could lay Audley's cabin wide open so they could finish us off as they pleased. No, it's got to be a bold strike or we're cooked and browned to a turn!"

They smoked in silence, watching the grimly handsome face as he thought it out. "Here's the next move as I see it," he announced at last. "It's only a few hours till dark. Meathook Jabe's men and horses will be tired from runnin' us. They'll straggle back to town, drink her dry and boast about how they beat us. They won't start for the A-1 before tomorrow, anyhow. I must make shore about Marcus Daly. We'll snooze this afternoon and tonight I'll sneak into Butte and look around."

"Alone?" asked Yellowstone, and Mireles looked worried.

"Yeah, alone. Yuh boys can wait near while I smell things out. One can get by easier than a party."

The Rio Kid was the general so they accepted orders. One stood guard while the others dozed in the forest, their mounts unsaddled and picketed.

Just before the velvet blanket of darkness fell over the rugged mountains the wolf hunters made a small fire of almost smokeless wood and cooked coffee, strips of jerked meat from their pouches. Hardtack and a smoke filled out this meal.

Cinching up, checking their weapons, the five started for Butte, bearing west of north so they would approach the settlement from a new direction. From the heights they could view the sweep of the valley and see the twinkling yellow oil lights of the mining center.

Later, the Rio Kid conferred with his partners on the shadowed outskirts.

They had crossed the river west of town and taken refuge in a rickety, abandoned shed which had once been a gold miner's quarters.

"I won't be over two hours, boys," said Bob Pryor. "I'll be back with yuh at midnight, mebbe before. Don't take any chances. Lie low here and I'll reach Daly if he's still alive and kickin'. Keep out of Butte, savvy?"

He did not actually voice it but he was ordering them not to come in, even to save him in case he should fall into Chasmer's clutches. He had no desire that they sacrifice their lives for him.

It had cooled off with the sun gone. Butte's many kerosene lamps and candles combined to throw a saffron glow into the misty valley air. The center was crowded and gave off an ominous, low-pitched drone, broken by strains of fiddles and concertinas or a particularly loud howl.

Mireles pressed his general's hand as the Rio Kid pulled rein and turned the mouse-colored dun. Kelly, Johnson and young Mike Reed silently watched as their leader started into Butte.

CHAPTER IX

Trapped

KEEPING to the shadows the Rio Kid followed on the winding side way leading to Butte's heart. His Stetson brim was pulled down and his loaded pistols ready for action. The roving, alert eyes missed nothing.

He penetrated to within a couple of blocks of the mass meeting which was

"LIVER-EATING" JOHNSON

ONE of three brothers, "Liver-eating" Johnson was a celebrated hunter and scout of the upper Missouri and Montana. Bearded and tough, he roamed the dangerous wilderness, wresting a living from the land. His sobriquet is said to have been derived from an oft-repeated threat that he would personally consume the liver of the first Indian who dared come near his cabin. Many old-timers insist Johnson did eat it.

He was a friend of Yellowstone Kelly's and hunted and scouted with him.

going on near the city hall and jail. There were lights everywhere. At the next corner he spied three men carrying sawed-off shotguns, lounging outside the brightly lit window of a saloon. He recognized a couple of the toughs, was sure they were Meathook's retainers.

He quietly turned Saber into a dark run between two long sheds. The passage, as he explored it, took him to the rear of the buildings. There was a small, three-sided stable in the yard but a wooden fence kept him from riding farther. He left Saber in the stable, deciding it would be best to proceed afoot the rest of the way. To ride through the center would be to court certain death.

Exploring, he found passages which took him through to the next road. Both ways he saw armed toughs at the intersections and he crossed in the middle of the block, headed for Marcus Daly's home, a short distance from the Grand Hotel.

By shinnying fences and using the spaces between structures he came out at a point close to the mass meeting.

Meathook Jabe Torpy was making a speech from a flat wagon at the edge of the plaza. His booming, harsh tones carried to the Rio Kid. Not far off stood Ichabod Chasmer's elegant Concord coach and in an open window was the lantern-jawed banker who had come to seize Butte. Chasmer was observing the crowd as he listened to Torpy's fiery talk.

"I tell yuh, gents, we got to clean out the thieves and killers in these parts! The roads ain't safe, with these robbers lurkin' outside town waitin' for innocent victims. The Rio Kid and his

band have terrorized women and kids and slain decent citizens. It's the worst bunch ever infested the territory. Now I'll tell yuh somethin'. Their headquarters is at Tex Audley's A-1 Ranch not far from here! After they've committed a holdup, they hide out and Audley pertects 'em. I'll lead the way and face 'em down. I ain't afeared. Three—seven—seventy-seven!"

Meathook waved his steel arm as he roared the mystic sign of the vigilantes.

There had been other speeches and free drinks were being ordered up every so often to keep the crowd in good humor, Chasmer no doubt footing the bill.

Thoughtless miners and cowboys would be swept into such a lynch mob as Torpy was whipping up. Lies, witnesses perjuring themselves as Chasmer ordered, burning liquor passed out, helped pull the wool over Butte's eyes. There was nobody around to contradict whatever Torpy wished to say, armed agents maintaining a vigil in case any objectors dared pipe up. Marshal Rucker was gone, Marcus Daly missing, the Rio Kid and his wolf hunters bullet bait for any armed foe who sighted them.

Colonel Audley was pinned down at his ranch.

"Free drinks, boys!" shouted Meathook Jabe, waving toward the saloons. "Take a breather."

Cheers rose and the gathering broke off, hurrying to enjoy Chasmer's magnanimity. The Rio Kid took advantage of the rush to hustle down the block. He turned in not far from Daly's home, the front room of which had a light in it.

Soon he was at the kitchen entry, and rapped on the wooden panel with his Colt butt.

A Chinese manservant unbolted the door and peeked out at him.

"Is Mr. Daly home?" demanded the Rio Kid.

"No home. Go on."

"Have yuh heard from him? This is very important. What happened to him?"

"No savvy, no savvy. Go on." The servant tried to slam the door.

The Rio Kid stuck a booted foot in the crack, holding it open. "Yuh must know where he is. Was he shot or captured this mornin'? I'm a friend of his, the Rio Kid."

"No savvy."

THE Rio Kid leaped back with a startled exclamation, Colt flying in his ready hand. Dark figures stormed at him from both sides, armed toughs who had sighted his lithe form in the shaft from the kitchen doorway.

"It's the Rio Kid, shore enough," howled a burly miner in corduroys and runover boots.

"Told yuh I seen him sneakin' across the lane!"

They were members of Meathook's band who had been after the wolf hunters. Guns hastily roared. His Colt snapped, even as he threw himself away. He put his left hand on the splintery board fence bounding the yard and vaulted over. Slugs rapped through the feeble barrier, hunting him. Ducked down he heard the close whistle of metal as they tore after him, whooping it up and firing, howling to their friends.

The Rio Kid could not pick and choose his route. He plunged blindly through the nearest alley and they galloped on his trail, able to target him against the lighted main street. A ricocheting bullet skipped off the packed dirt and clipped his left boot, burning the calf of his leg. He emerged onto Montana hardly twenty yards from where Chasmer's coach stood, with Meathook Jabe Torpy leaning against the door while he talked with his evil master.

Torpy straightened up, hand flying to his Colt. Chasmer was facing the Rio Kid and pointed a long, bony finger at the running Pryor, who limped a bit from his seared leg.

"There's the Rio Kid!" bellowed Meathook, whirling to shoot.

Chasmer thrust a carbine from the window of his coach. He was taking cool aim and the Rio Kid, looking back over his shoulder, hurriedly loosed a slug at the banker. He heard the whine of Chasmer's rifle lead but Chasmer ducked back, startled by the crack as Pryor's quick one grooved the coach door.

Torpy was pulling trigger even as he boomed the alarm. The roughs who had trailed Bob Pryor to Daly's came out and added their excited shouts to

the hubbub. A hundred armed men sallied from saloons and other spots, to help in the chase.

Cut off from the south and his friends, the Rio Kid jumped to the saddle of a chestnut gelding standing at a nearby rail. He ripped the rein and whirled, starting north on Montana.

"After him! Take him! There he goes!"

Everybody was yelling advice. Bullets sang in a hail after the zigzagging, fleeing Pryor. Already many of Torpy's hands were mounting to follow the fugitive. He pelted on, took the next turn left and was out of the worst of it for a few moments but before he could gallop from the lighted center a knot of hurrying Torpy vigilantes cut him off, making the swing as they hustled to answer their chief's calls.

There were enemies everywhere. The guards on the corners, warned by the heavy gunfire and the shouting, were raising rifles and shotguns. As he tore up Idaho Street two more leaped from under an awning to check his rush. His Colt knocked one over but the second got off a blast from a shotgun before the Rio Kid could give him any attention.

Pryor felt the borrowed mustang give a convulsive leap, shudder and slow. He loosened his toes in the tapped stirrups to jump as he slewed in the saddle to deal with the shotgunner, sending him running back howling.

But the damage was done. The chestnut was losing pace with every step. He fought nobly to keep going as the rider urged him along but the buck had spread and crippled him.

The mustang made another block. Torpy and his followers were in sight and gaining. The chestnut halted and slowly began to sink. The Rio Kid kicked his spurred feet clear and jumped. A howl of triumph welled in hostile throats as he fell.

Rolling over, he came up and hunted refuge. This was a residential section, and there were no horses standing in the gutters. He had to run for it, his leg hurting with each bound. Cutting into a side aisle he limped along and his breath came harder and harder with the effort. Some of Torpy's killers galloped on to surround the block while more arrived to join the chase.

BOB PRYOR paused to catch his wind and decide on his next move. He could hear them all around as they quickly threw a cordon about the area, closing in. Heavy steps and warning calls told him of their positions.

Looking for some desperate expedient which might permit escape the Rio Kid sighted a rickety black frame nearby. Against the murky sky it stood out like a gallows frame. He realized that it might be one of the myriad deserted mine shafts with which Butte abounded. The town had built over many of them.

Moving to this he found the inky en-

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trance. A steep path made of debris slanted to the depths. "Here goes," he muttered. He dug in his high heels, even so sliding most of the way and dreading a sudden, hidden drop that might cripple him or prove fatal. He helped check his descent with his hand against the rough wall. After fifty feet the tunnel leveled off. He stopped and could hear his enemies' voices, megaphoning through.

"Mebbe he ducked into this old mine," someone said.

"Get in there and make shore," snarled Meathook Jabe.

Rolling pebbles and dirt warned they were coming down the incline. A match scratched, giving a feeble shine.

"Black as pitch down here," announced a searcher. "Fetch a lantern, boys." There was a lull during which the Rio Kid sought to gain what he could for with lights they could proceed faster. He moved as quietly as possible since they were not certain he had entered the mine.

Heavy logs cut into sections, the bark peeling from them, shored up the roof, slab timbers preventing caveins. He kept a hand stretched out so as not to bump into the props. Now and then a

crosscut opened from the main tunnel but he passed them, the air staler as he headed on.

At last his groping hand encountered a bark-covered wall. He looked back. He could not yet see the lantern beam. He struck a match and in the gloomy vault found he had come to the end. An upright partition of slabs blocked him. He drew a Colt, the hammer spur back under his thumb, determined to sell his life dearly. But an idea occurred to him and he pouched his pistol and struck another light.

At the bottom the nails holding the thick slabs in position had rusted away and he was able to pull a couple of them out so that he could squeeze behind the wall. Hastily he turned, with plenty of space in which to maneuver, and worked the timbers back into position.

He waited there, revolver ready. Soon faint yellow lines told of the lantern's approach, light coming through the cracks between the uneven timbers. The Rio Kid peered out at his foes. A bearded tough, one he had seen during the fights with Torpy's vigilantes, lamp in one hand and pistol in the other, cautiously made the last bend in the tunnel and pulled up short as he saw the partition.

"He ain't here," announced the outlaw.

Meathook Jabe Torpy shoved past his aide, several more at his heels, armed with shotguns and Colts. The yellow beams touched the steel arm hook.

"He could have ducked into one of them crosscuts," growled Torpy. "Look 'em over. Watch yoreselves, he may start shootin'."

Without a close inspection of the slab wall, they turned back to check up on the side tunnels.

The Rio Kid waited. He was surprised and pleased as he found he could get plenty of air. In fact, it seemed fresher on this side of the partition than on the other. Checking up, he found that the tunnel went on. Perhaps the wall marked the limits of a subdivision.

He had nothing to lose and worked his way along. After what seemed hours he came into a wider tunnel, shored with fresher log sections. It had the look of being more recently worked than the old mine. By the time he had made half a dozen turns into connecting cuts he was completely confused as to direction.

New hope beat in his heart. He might be able to locate an audit unguarded by his enemies and thus escape. At least they would have trouble finding him now in this maze under Butte.

The Rio Kid grew weary, trudging through ankle-deep droppings, much like ploughing along in shifting sand. He finally sat down to rest. He could hear nothing except now and then a faint, strange rumbling which seemed very far away. He decided this might be a wagon passing on a road above.

THERE was no danger of gas in these metallic, dry workings. He rolled a cigarette and smoked, with plenty of air for the flame.

Finishing his breather the Rio Kid went on. He found a tunnel with an upward slant and hopefully followed through. It led into a wider one. An hour more of blind wandering and he sighted light ahead, hurried toward it.

The light came from several miners' lamps stuck in wall niches of a large underground chamber, evidently an entrance vault where miners kept picks, shovels, lamps and other equipment. Racks of these tools lined the shored sides. A couple of sturdy, padlocked chests stood close at hand, red letters marking them, EXPLOSIVES! Blasting powder, fuses and caps would be in these containers. Small cars, some filled with ore, stood on roughly laid tracks. They could be moved by men or pulled by burros.

Cool, tangy air draughted from the far end and as he crouched in the darkness to the rear, the Rio Kid knew that the free outer world could not be far away. But it was tantalizingly blocked to him for in the roomy vault were some thirty armed toughs in stained clothing and caps or old hats. They were lounging around, holding flasks of liquor, smoking pipes as they listened to what Grizzly Lew Knowles had to say.

Knowles was briefing his miners. His matted hair and beard presented a wild aspect and his booted feet were spread. His hands hung limp at his burly sides and he gave the impression of the ferocious beast for which he had been nicknamed.

"Boys, tomorrow we go out with Meathook Jabe's bunch and clean out

them rancher rats. Tex Audley and his pards have made us trouble. We'll blast 'em out of their den. I got the bombs fixed up and it will be a cinch."

"What time do we start?" asked a miner.

"We'll be all set at four in the afternoon. Might as well take it easy here for the night."

There was a stir at the gate and soon Meathook Jabe Torpy appeared with Ichabod Chasmer and half a dozen vigilantes.

"Howdy, Knowles," said Meathook. "Say, we near caught the Rio Kid in town. We think he may have slunk into a deserted tunnel and is hidin' underground. Yuh got a map of Butte's workin's?"

Knowles shook his shaggy head. "No, I savvy plenty about 'em. Where did he go under?"

Meathook told him. "We have guards set so he can't sneak out the way he went in."

Grizzley Lew thought for a time, then said, "That's an old silver drift, never amounted to much. Someone must have cut through from this big mine and walled up. Happens a lot."

Chasmer spoke, twirling his ruby ring. His cold eyes glared in his hard, scowling face.

"I must settle the score with this man," he snapped. "From what I've learned the Rio Kid has caused me more annoyance than the rest of Butte put together. I'll pay a thousand dollars for his scalp, dead or alive."

Chasmer's power had sprouted with mushroom rapidity as he took over in Butte. The deference shown him by such rascals as Torpy and Knowles marked him as a terrible menace to decent elements. The Rio Kid could sense his arch-foe's strength.

"Yes, suh, I'll go with yuh, see can I trace the cuss." Knowles picked several miner aides, warned the others to stay put and left with Chasmer and Torpy.

The projected attack on the A-1 alarmed the Rio Kid. He burned to escape so he could help Audley hold off the savage enemy. The expert Grizzly Lew might track him through that maze of shafts and tunnels, catch him against the lighted vault filled with armed toughs Knowles commanded as an auxiliary force to Meathook's outlaw riders.

He silently drew back a short distance, racking his brain for a means of eluding death, hoping fate might offer him some slight opportunity to smash out of the trap.

CHAPTER X

The Noose

MIKE REED stared around at the grim faces of his three friends, the wolf hunters. They squatted in the abandoned cabin outside Butte, waiting for the Rio Kid as he had ordered. They were smoking to pass the time and the reddish glows as they drew in on the cigarets showed the firm but pleasant features of Yellowstone Kelly, the wild beard and gleaming eyes of Liver-Eating Johnson, the hawk-like visage of the Mexican, Celestino Mireles, trail comrade of the Rio Kid.

[*Turn page*]

From Butte the night breeze brought telltale sounds which the frontiersmen could interpret from past experience. Volleys of gunshots and distant howls told them a ruckus had suddenly broken out in the center of the settlement.

Reed had brushed off his coonskin cap with its ringed tail plume and his shock of yellow hair, his wide-set brown eyes, the long-muscled body easy in the supple buckskin garments, offered a portrait of youthful strength. All his 'teens, while he was most impressionable to experiences, had been spent on the loser's side of the Civil War.

Recently a shining new factor had come into Mike Reed's harsh, unanchored life, He realized that until he had seen Harriet he had been drifting with no objective. A vision had arisen for him and impossible as it might seem of fulfillment, Reed could still hope. He had fallen in love with Tex Audley's daughter and plans for the future were shaping in his soul. He felt a need to steady and settle down, create a home. The girl had inspired this in the lonely savage hunter's being. Taming was only one step away.

Harriet had smiled upon him. But Reed, who was shy of women for he had had little to do with them and few chances to talk with them in the army and in the wilderness, had noticed she also had smiles for the Rio Kid, for Kelly and the other friends who had helped her father.

She had cheerfully served them while they had been at the ranch. In the battle during Meathook's attack, her high courage had been evident.

Reed had thought it all over, recalling every word, every gesture she had made, trying to evaluate them. He had felt burning jealousy of the Rio Kid, whose flashing god looks and qualities of leadership made him stand above the strongest. It seemed that any young woman must choose Bob Pryor over Mike Reed. He had fought this, knowing it was base, for the Rio Kid and his hunters had saved Reed's life.

But it was hard. Secretly Reed had begrudged the attention Harriet had bestowed on Yellowstone Kelly, on Celestino and dashing young fellows at the A-1. It was, he felt, worse than the gold fever when a man suspected his best friends, believing the others had an advantage denied him. . . .

Like knights of old, great feats must be accomplished before the princess could even be claimed. Ichabod Chasmer, the cold-eyed, ambitious raider who had set loose the vigilantes and evil miner elements around Butte, could be the ogre. A handful opposed Chasmer, with Marcus Daly gone. Instinctively, Reed felt that the Rio Kid must be held to in order to win out.

Mireles was speaking, in a low tone touched by tense anxiety. *"Señores,* I do not like eet. I theenck zey have spied my General, the Rio Keed. *Si,* zat's why zey shoot so much."

The bursts of exploding weapons from the lighted heart of Butte increased rather than diminished.

"He told us to stay put," reminded Liver-Eating Johnson.

"To save us," argued Celestino.

"Wait," counseled Yellowstone Kelly. "He'll come back here if he busts loose. I figger he'll make it and if we're gone it could wreck his plans.

The bony Mexican jumped up and stepped outside. He impatiently paced up and down, now and then pausing to listen for sounds of an approaching horse which might be Saber carrying the Rio Kid.

BUT the time passed and their leader failed to arrive at the rendezvous. The shooting had long since died away. Dimly they could hear the night revelry of the lively settlement.

At last Mireles could stand it no longer. "I go een alone," he cried.

Mike Reed rose. "I'm with yuh, Celestino. If we don't hunt him before dawn it will be too late."

Yellowstone Kelly and Johnson also were convinced. The four wolf hunters made ready their mounts and weapons, hit leather and started for the center. Close in they found there were watchers posted on the approaches. They kept well to the west of Montana Street, heading north and hoping to hit a route by which they could stab in.

"He aimed to find Daly," remarked Reed. "So he'd shore try at his house."

"I savvy where that is," said Johnson.

The enemy held Butte. "Let's see can we get near Daly's," suggested Reed.

"It ain't far from the Grand Hotel." Liver-Eating Johnson forged into the

lead, his carbine held across his pommel ready for action. The others came single file, alert and on the prod.

They had surprising luck picking dark byways which took them into town. Many buildings had allowed space alongside them in which wagons could be parked or horses led back to the stables. They pulled up and stared across Montana Street.

"There's Marcus Daly's," said Johnson, pointing at the square, roomy home on the far side of the avenue. It was dark now and silent, the front door shut. "S'pose I go over and see what I can see? Yuh boys cover me."

"I'll go," offered Reed.

"No. They savvy yuh better than they do me," replied Johnson. He was already shoving his mustang into the light, trotting the horse straight toward Daly's.

The three left behind could see up the road to the Grand, still lit up and humming with funseekers.

"There's Meathook Jabe," grunted Yellowstone Kelly. The vigilante chief emerged from the bar onto the long, covered veranda. He swept the center with his keen eyes and sighted the figure of Liver-Eating Johnson in the middle of the street. At this moment a man down at the south corner whooped and fired a shot into the air. Perhaps he too had spied the enemy.

"The jig's up," said Reed hastily. "Come on, we better give Johnson a hand."

Torpy ran out into the road, staring down the line. Armed retainers hurried around him and he pointed at Johnson. Cries and cracking pistols sounded the alarm. The wolf hunters burst into the main avenue. A carbine crackled from the blackness of the passage beside Daly's house and Liver-Eating Johnson, ripping at his rein to turn, got off a quick reply.

The enemy response was swift and efficient. Blasts of fire tried to down the mounted quartet as Johnson retreated.

Meathook's shrill whistle was piping and from every point came toughs to join the fray.

"Back the way we come," gasped Johnson. "They got Daly's under watch!"

Reed was last in line, helping cover his friends. His carbine snapped at the driving enemy. Kelly, Mireles and Johnson pushed through the narrow alley they had used as an approach. Reed was but a few jumps away from its shelter. He turned in his saddle to shoot at a group of Torpy's followers who had run from a saloon close to his position.

They were raising Colts and shotguns to down him.

Then, with roaring abruptness, Mike Reed felt the world explode. Blackness struck him. . .

WHEN Reed came to, he was lying on a horse blanket. Yellow, uneven light flickered in the place and men were angrily arguing.

"I tell yuh, I hit the cuss," insisted one. "Yuh can see for yoreself it's a Colt made that crease in his scalp. Yuh had a shotgun."

"I got his horse, didn't I?" said his opponent sullenly.

"Shucks, yuh're both loco," announced a third. "I'm the man who downed him."

"Why argufy?" asked a peacemaker. "It ain't the Rio Kid. Who said there's a reward on Reed's hide like there is on Pryor's?"

"Well, they ought to pay us somethin'."

Reed's hat was missing. His head ached and his scalp felt stiff, his hair crusted with dried blood. One leg hurt and scratches and contusions covered him for he had fallen hard in the road when that bullet had kissed his skull. His weapons had been confiscated.

He sought to orient himself. Peeking through lowered lashes, for he hoped to keep them from discovering he was conscious, he could see the rock walls and roof of the great underground vault. A chest stood nearby, marked EXPLOSIVES. There were a number of men present, some in miner garb, others in the Stetsons and leather of the range riders commanded by Meathook Jabe.

Tobacco smoke and whisky fumes filled the air. Somebody came up behind him and dashed a pail of cold water into his face.

Reed had not guessed what was going to occur and he gave an involuntary gasp.

"Ho-ho, he's playin' possum!" a gruff voice shouted.

It was Grizzly Lew Knowles, the giant miner boss. Knowles seized Reed's buckskin shirt and pulled him roughly to his feet. He slapped the wolf hunter against the wall.

"Wake up, sidewinder," he snarled. "We savvy yore game."

Curious, fierce eyes fixed the captive.

"Here comes Torpy," announced a rough by the entry.

Meathook Jabe, Ichabod Chasmer and others hurried in. It was no use feigning senselessness any longer and Reed braced his shoulders and raised his head. He was determined to die game, now the moment had come. He shut off thoughts of Harriet, of the crashing hopes for a decent life which had inspired him lately.

Chasmer's fishy glance drilled the prisoner. "Good. It's Reed, one of the men I want most."

Reed had seen the banker kill Si Kinny in the mountain park and Chasmer was aware he could be a dangerous witness against him. Chasmer pointed at a heavy timber which helped support the ceiling toward the rear, where the vault sloped down toward one of the branching tunnels.

"You can get a rope over that. Do it now, mark him with the sign and dump him in the plaza as a lesson to those who dare to buck me." Chasmer's cold eyes bulged, glaring their hate.

A willing aide shook out a greased lariat, adjusting the noose. Nimbly the tough climbed to the top of an ore car and after several tries worked the free end of the rope over the beam. He jumped down and holding both ends made sure it would run freely.

Meathook Jabe Torpy scowled at Mike Reed. He reached out with his steel hook and the point cut into Reed's shoulder through his buckskin shirt as Torpy yanked back. It hurt terribly and Reed doubled over, forced to move to his doom.

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CHAPTER XI

Lights Out

ICY sweat stood out on the Rio Kid as he watched them prepare to lynch his friend, Mike Reed.

Pryor crouched at a rocky jut where a shaft branched from the main vault. He had been lurking nearby for hours. He had not dared explore too far back through the criss-crossing drifts, slopes and tunnels of the great mine. He had only a few precious matches and the narrow aisles were inky black.

Pryor had kept returning to the only way out he could find, and he persisted in the hope that eventually his enemies would depart so he could reach the sweet, free world. It had proved impossible to retrace his steps back to the abandoned silver workings through which he had come and he had not tried too hard for he had overheard the foe saying they would keep that exit guarded.

Reed had only a few minutes left. Chasmer, Grizzly Lew Knowles, Meathook Jabe and a knot of miner and range rider toughs thronged on the scene, taking pleasure in the brutal play. Four lamps in their wall niches offered plenty of light.

"Here goes," muttered the Rio Kid. He refused to let them kill Reed without a fight, hopeless though that prospect might be.

He had four pistols, two at his sides, two more hidden in shoulder holsters under his shirt, a usual precaution with many frontiersmen. Five chambers in each cylinder held shells so he could get off twenty shots before he must stop to shove fresh cartridges into hot weapons. This came in handy in case of Indian attack or other occasions when a man had to stand off large numbers of opponents.

But during the fighting the evening before he had used up ammunition and he was limited to what remained in his crossed belts, empty loops showing where he had replaced spent shells in his Colts.

Chasmer and Torpy stood side by side, facing to the rear and the Rio Kid's position. Grizzly Lew hulked with his mighty back to Pryor, and the rest bunched up here or there with no thought of formation, smoking, jesting at Reed's plight with the heartless cruelty of such renegades.

The Rio Kid feared they might injure Reed so that he would be unable to move. He must act instantly before it proved too late, and he went into action with pantherish speed.

Two of the miner lamps, hit by Pryor's accurate lead, had smashed out before the startlingly loud shots registered reaction in the enemy. The vigilantes jumped in their boots and began milling around, unable for a moment to place the cause of it all for the echoes banged back and forth in the underground vault, confusingly mixed up. The Rio Kid was on one knee, pushed to the rock jut of the wall.

A third lamp snuffed out, wrecked by the heavy slug.

They began shouting and pulling their revolvers.

"Here I am, Reed!" bellowed the Rio Kid, his officer's voice dominant. "Run for it!"

Mike Reed saw him and hope twisted the hunter's face. As the rattled toughs swung to confront the Rio Kid, forgetting their victim for the instant, Reed ducked past Grizzly Lew Knowles and lunged free.

Only one lamp remained, its flickering yellow flame dimly lighting the great vault. Roars of rage rose.

Chasmer screeched, "The Rio Kid! There he is!"

Pryor could not waste a single shot trying for anybody not immediately threatening to Reed. Grizzly Lew growled in bearlike fury and sprang after Reed, reaching for him. The giant miner was within inches of the desperate man when the Rio Kid threw a bullet at Knowles, shooting past his friend. He hit Knowles in the ribs, and Grizzly Lew half turned, staggering to a halt.

Reed had lowered his head and clenched his fists as he pelted on. Knowles' massive body partially shielded Reed for a breath. Chasmer, Meathook and two more had already pulled trigger. Knowles was mortally wounded, about to go down. His sudden shift caused him to catch metal from his friends' guns, metal intended for Reed. As the Rio Kid hastily doused the last of the lamps, Grizzly Lew shuddered to the ground.

IT WAS blind fighting now, save for the eerie stabs of exploding weapons. The Rio Kid held out his left hand to contact Mike Reed.

"Come on, Mike. Get back here."

Reed was gasping and violently shaking. The Rio Kid was aware of the lead clipping about them and swiftly drew Reed around the jut where they were protected for the moment.

"Take this," said Pryor, thrusting a loaded six-shooter into Reed's hand.

"Lanterns, get lanterns, after 'em," shouted Chasmer.

The concerted enemy fire harmlessly plugged into ore and dirt or glanced from the wall of rock.

"Come on," ordered the Rio Kid. "I'll lead yuh, Mike. I done explored this shaft. Watch out for that track." He gripped Reed's left wrist and moved off from the vault where the foe made ready for the chase, lighting lamps and checking up.

They stayed between the narrow metal rails which served as a guide for the ore cars pulled from the depths by burros. Fifty yards back half a dozen empties stood ready for loading when work was resumed in the morning. Decent miners would be on the job as usual. Grizzly Lew's command had consisted of riffraff who could be bought for such mean doings as Chasmer had ordered.

The Rio Kid and Reed, saving their breath, squeezed between the rough wall and the wooden sides of the ore cars. They had another obstruction between themselves and the infuriated vigilantes.

"Here they come," gasped Reed.

They heard the enemy approaching, on their trail. Pryor was concerned at Reed's condition. The shock of the scalp wound, the ill treatment he had undergone, had sapped the young hunter's vitality. One leg was strained so that it hardly would hold him up although with death at his heels Reed had managed to run from the vault.

Side aisles from which ore was being removed during working hours branched from the railed tunnel. A switch came in from their right and the

Rio Kid swung into the inky blackness. By brushing a booted foot along one rail he could make fairly good progress though it was entirely blind going.

Reed dragged more and more, began hopping, suddenly fell down. He pulled himself up, assisted by the Rio Kid.

"I'm ashamed, Rio Kid! I'm weak as a kitten," he whispered. "I'm holdin' yuh back. Let me stick here, I'll hold 'em. Yuh keep goin'."

"Don't talk like a fool."

They could place the pursuers by the echoing voices as the vigilantes called to one another. A faint glow moved uncertainly as the lamps passed the side shaft. "Mebbe they went up there," came Meathook Torpy's gruff voice.

The Rio Kid tried to support Reed as they went on. But the young fellow was larger, and heavy. Exploring gun-hands would soon overtake the two fugitives at this rate. As they ran into several more cars, the Rio Kid decided it was impossible to keep on. He let Reed sink to the track.

A groping hand felt the crushed ore in the loaded carriers. He went back and pulled Reed to his feet.

"We're goin' to hide in these cars, Mike," he breathed, voice down so as not to attract the foe.

He boosted Reed into a car and helped cover the hunter with a layer of material, chunks of ore and gravel as the miners' picks had torn it from the walls. Pryor would not leave his partner. He climbed into the next car and managed to work himself out of sight, using his hands to pile the stuff over his body. A couple of uneven, large pieces served to bridge his head and air enough came through the gaps.

His lungs were heaving so that he feared the searchers would hear him. As he held his breath a moment he caught the stertorous rasping of Mike Reed a few feet away. It was ten minutes before several armed vigilantes slowly approached. The faint noises grew louder, footfalls, a curse as a man stubbed his toe on the track, low talk.

"Watch out! They may be waitin' behind them cars!" The speaker seemed to be right on top of Pryor but actually was some steps away.

THE Rio Kid tensed, ready to jump up and make a last fight. His tortured breathing had somewhat abated during the lull. A lamp was held up and men glanced into each car. But they were not certain which way the two fugitives had taken. Others had pushed on deeper, hunting through the branches. Half a dozen toughs went on past the string of loaded carriers, keeping on with the search.

It was half an hour before they returned, swearing at their luck. They did not even look into the cars this time.

The Rio Kid had frozen as they went on back to the main tunnel and the outer vault. Now he relaxed, feeling safe for the moment.

"Yuh all right, Mike?" he whispered.

"Yes. My leg's numb."

"Take a snooze. We'll stick right here."

Perhaps rest would bring Reed to a point where he could pull himself together. The Rio Kid was worn out, run to a frazzle. He closed his eyes, just for forty winks. . . .

He jolted awake. The car was moving, its wheels squealing on the uneven rails. Dim yellow light told that miner lamps were close at hand.

He was unwilling to expose his position, not knowing who might be shifting the carriers. Reed's car, next his, was ahead and he heard the grunting burros drawing the loads. He felt the swing as the rough wheels took the switch. After while echoes and his own guess as to location informed him they must be passing through the entry vault and fierce hope came into his heart. Escape was at hand.

The brilliant light sifting through the chunks of ore hurt his eyes and it was some minutes before he could see properly. It was morning and miners were at work. The cars were being pulled to a dumping point not far away, where the material would be chuted into the smelters.

The Rio Kid pushed off the shielding pieces and rose to a sitting position. Blue sky was overhead and he could catch the genial noises of the world. Boys were leading the little donkeys pulling the cars. Behind him lay the prison where he had spent so many tense hours.

"Mike, are yuh there?" called the Rio Kid.

Reed answered him. "Can I get up?"

"Come on. I see some horses not

far away."

Mike Reed's shock of yellow hair, thick with gravel and sand, appeared in the car ahead. The startled guides sang out to the men riding the loads.

"What yuh doin' up there, mister?" called a youth.

The Rio Kid hopped over the side and landed on his feet. "Nothin' to worry about, sonny. We had one too many and fell asleep, that's all." He trotted to give Mike Reed a hand and spare the young hunter's stiffened leg.

A few jumps away, under the corrugated iron roof of a shed, stood several saddled mustangs. An overseer, who had spied the two leaving the cars, shouted and hurried at them:

"Say, yuh must be the hombres the vigilantes are after! Halt! His hand dropped to his holstered pistol.

The Rio Kid drew, covering him. He had not before seen this specimen, who might be an honest person deceived by Torpy and Chasmer.

"Keep off!" he warned. "I ain't hurtin' yuh if yuh behave. Climb on a horse, Mike."

Reed limped and hopped to a rawboned black and pulled himself into the leather seat. The Rio Kid backed after him, an eye on the foreman who had frozen under the gun. But some of the donkey boys and a couple of miners near the big entrance began yelling. Half a dozen toughs, no doubt members of the departed Grizzly Lew's band, ran from the vault, weapons ready. They saw the Rio Kid and Reed and threw up their pistols.

Pryor and his friend were riding out from under the shed. Bullets followed them as they cut down the bare, gutted slope toward freedom, expecting more and more of their foes to spring into action.

IN A brief glance, they could orient themselves. The mine from which they had emerged was in Butte, on the slope running down to the creek, and not far from Washington Street. The Rio Kid, in his long wanderings underground, had covered but a few hundred yards as a crow would fly.

Picking up speed, they hit the dirt road and galloped south on Washington. But though there was hue and cry at the mine, the town seemed clear of the vigilantes. They saw nothing of Chasmer, of Meathook Jabe and the legions they commanded.

There were plenty of people around, women shopping, cowboys and other riders, wagons, townsfolks, but none offered to challenge the running pair, only staring at the wild-looking, bedraggled figures speeding past.

"I aim to pick up Saber, Mike. He's not far away."

Within a few minutes he dropped the borrowed horse, and went on, safe in the saddle of the dun. They crossed Front and headed for the creek, and in the clear sighted Mireles, Johnson and Kelly not far from the shack where they had waited for the Rio Kid the night before. Waves and calls and the five joined forces, crossing the river and galloping to a grove.

They pulled up to trade notes, everybody overjoyed to find the others alive. Canteens were passed around, smokes rolled, and they had jerked beef and hardtack in their saddlebags.

"Chasmer pulled out of Butte just after daybreak," replied Kelly in answer to the Rio Kid's question. "He was in that fancy coach of his. Meathook Jabe and his vigilantes were along. They headed north over the hump. About thirty miners were in the bunch but I didn't see Grizzly Lew."

"Knowles has cashed in his chips," said the Rio Kid. "But I don't like this. Looks as though Chasmer has decided to hit even earlier than he intended. I s'pose our escapin' hurried the sidewinder. They're goin' to wipe out Audley."

The five wolf hunters exchanged glances. They were hard-bitten fighting men and ready for anything against the enemy but they would be unable to break up such an army as Chasmer had collected.

"We shore need Marcus Daly," growled Bob Pryor.

"Mebbe he's back in Butte if he's still kickin'," suggested Yellowstone Kelly.

"Let's try his house again. With Torpy away we can ride through town."

They were not molested as they pushed along Montana Street. Daly's house looked deserted but banging on the front door brought a Chinese manservant to a window. "Go way! Misser Daly not home."

"Where is he?" demanded the Rio Kid.

Plainly Daly was not there and they could gain no satisfactory information. While the other three sat their horses on guard outside, the Rio Kid and Yellowstone entered a hardware store up the road and bought extra shotguns and shells, spare cartridges for Colts and carbines. The merchant, an oldster who knew Daly well, had not seen the copper king for days. Rumors of the fight on Front Street had flashed through Butte. One had it that Marcus Daly had been shot to death but there was no proof, his body had not yet been picked up.

"Say, ain't yuh the Rio Kid?" asked the hardware store owner, peering at Pryor. "Yuh better watch out. The vigilantes are huntin' yuh!"

"And we're huntin' the vigilantes," drawled the Rio Kid.

They went out and moved on. Mike Reed was in an agony of dread about the fate of his sweetheart and all felt the pall. Tex Audley and his friends held the ranch but they would be blasted out, slain in the ruins when Chasmer attacked.

"I'm goin' out there, boys," cried Reed. "I'd rather die than see Chasmer win."

They were all of the same mind although they expressed it in different ways. "We're right with yuh, Mike," nodded the Rio Kid quietly.

"I'll broil that Chasmer sidewinder's liver for dinner," threatened Johnson.

Yellowstone Kelly grinned. "First yuh got to catch yore game before yuh enjoy yore meal."

Celestino did not speak but watched his general, the Rio Kid, whom he would always follow.

Grim eyes sweeping the windows and byways, likely spots for drygulchers, the wolf hunters rode through the heart of Butte. They set their mounts to the north slope out of the settlement, hurrying to join the desperate battle shaping at the A-1.

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CHAPTER XII

A-1

WHEN they reached the summit, they could look back at the descending, uneven giant steps on which Butte was built. The air was warm and tingling with the aromatic breath of the pine forests, while tremendous vistas of glaciated peaks and majestically rugged mountains swept westward and to the east.

They hit a rocky trail, the shortest route to Audley's, each man immersed in his own thoughts and saving his breath for what was facing them, the fight against impossible odds as they sought to check the vicious, juggernaut progress of Ichabod Chasmer.

Countering the banker's outlaw moves had kept them on the jump and there had been no time in which to organize real opposition. Meathook Torpy's vigilantes held the field. While Tex Audley and his men would give a good account of themselves, as would the wolf hunters, the sheer weight of numbers, the explosives, would guarantee Chasmer's victory.

The quintet rode in war formation, Liver-Eating Johnson out in front, Mireles holding the rear, the others with plenty of space between their mustangs.

Two trails met at a crossroads. The Rio Kid's keen, trained eyes caught the startled flight of birds winging from over the east-west road to his left. That way led westward to other diggings. First, before man, animals had come along it, then the red raiders, staying high so they might sweep the lower land for prey and enemies. Wagons followed the creek valley which was easier and so did most horsemen now that the river route had been improved.

Always careful and alert, Bob Pryor turned in his saddle at a high point, checking to see what had alarmed the birds.

"Come on," called Mike Reed, as the Rio Kid stopped Saber and took his field glasses from the leather case at-

tached to his gear.

Pryor adjusted the binoculars, studying the line of riders who came into view around a granite upthrust. "Hold on, boys," he ordered. Mireles had come up and paused by his comrade. A whistle brought Johnson back and the impatient Reed, and Kelly, waited near the Rio Kid.

"Look like soldiers, some of 'em," he announced. "Take a peek, Yellowstone."

Kelly studied the horsemen. More and more pushed around the bulge of the mountain, taking a steep side trail which would lead them into Butte.

"They got on Federal uniforms, quite a few," agreed Yellowstone. "But they don't move like regulars would."

"True. And there's plenty without cavalry fittin's."

The Rio Kid tried again, watching the large party.

"Everybody at the ranch will be killed if we don't hustle," said Reed.

The Rio Kid gave a sharp cry. "Sell my hide for the tallow if that ain't Marcus Daly among 'em!"

Johnson snatched the glasses, "Yuh're right!"

They all perked up for each knew what it meant. Marcus Daly was very much alive and returning to Butte with his fighting forces to confront Ichabod Chasmer. There was no need for the Rio Kid to give the order for with one accord the wolf hunters rushed up the road to signal the riders on the slope.

Soon they were within hailing distance and advance guards, with carbines at the ready, faced toward them as they made the signal of friendship. Marcus Daly evidently recognized them for he came toward them, waving, speaking to his followers.

Daly came up, leaned from his saddle, his Irish smile lighting his whole face. He gripped Pryor's hand.

"Rio Kid! I'm mighty glad you boys escaped that day. I've been worried about you."

"We're the ones been worried," the Rio Kid grinned. "We looked everywhere for yuh. Yuh huntin' Chasmer?"

ANGER clouded Daly's strong features at mention of his arch-foe. "I am. I took the mountain route, figurin' I'd surprise him. Is he in Butte?"

"No, suh. He's hittin' the A-1 with everything he's got. We were on our way out there when we sighted yuh."

The Rio Kid did not need to ask. Daly set his jaw. "Let's get goin'," he cried, and waved his men to follow.

Enroute at the head of the powerful column, the Rio Kid and Daly brought each other up-to-date.

"My horse was hit," explained the copper king. "The dust was thick and I turned into a side way, jumped when he fell. I had to run for it. I squeezed under the back of a shed into a hole some polecats called home. I'll never shoot another skunk. I stuck in that burrow till after dark, hopin' you boys had made it. Seein' how bad it was in Butte was fair warnin'. I didn't try to reach my house but quietly picked up a saddle horse and made for Anaconda. I've been collectin' fighters since and here we are. Some of the boys brought out their old uniforms to throw a scare into Chasmer and Torpy."

The Rio Kid was delighted with the army Marcus Daly had fetched along. Most of them were miners, trusted employes and loyal friends. Some wore range garb but the general costume consisted of corduroy or whipcord pants tucked into high boots, caps with vizors, gray or blue shirts. They carried pistols and carbines or shotguns.

A few miles north, nearing the valley in which Audley's stood, the Rio Kid called up Mike Reed.

"What do yuh think, Mike? Yuh savvy this country better than any of us. If we stick on this road Torpy will spy us easy as we push in. Do yuh savvy a back way?"

"There's one along the west ridge, among the lodgepoles," replied Reed. "We could get mighty close before they see us."

They veered from the beaten track and worked through on the valley rim, hidden by towering pines whose lower branches were dead and whose droppings offered a soft carpet for the hoofs of the many horses.

Nearly abreast of the A-1, they moved to the edge. Smoke billowed from the ranch and all about it were Chasmer's killers. As they watched, getting ready to charge, a dense, sudden puff close to the thick log wall marked the explosion of a crude grenade tossed at the house. They heard the heavy report as it rolled across the

valley, echoing from the mountain walls, and the breeze brought on it the triumphant howls of the outlaws.

"Some of 'em are still alive in there," gasped Mike Reed.

He spurted from the trees at the Rio Kid's signal. Bob Pryor's Saber, sensing the coming battle, snorted and shot forward. Cavalry-trained, Saber loved a fight, the bark of guns and the smell of powder. The avengers broke from the pine woods and started down the slope.

Saber quickly carried the Rio Kid out front, leading the charge. The Rebel yell shrilly rang out, the Yankee cattle cry joining it as decent men united to crush the evil elements marshalled by Ichabod Chasmer.

Out from the ranchhouse the Rio Kid saw Chasmer's fitted coach, a knot of guards around it. Meathook Jabe Torpy sat a black gelding close to his master. They were back out of easy range and protected by an outcropping of gray rocks. The Rio Kid, jolting in at gyrating speed, saw a couple of rifle barrels thrust from loopholes as Audley and his men undertook their rapidly diminishing defense. The south wall of the house was smoking heavily, the great logs twisted where exploding bombs had torn them from their moorings, and the roof sagged there.

Sharp yells of alarm and gunshots warned the attackers of the Rio Kid's and Daly's presence. Vigilantes jumped to their saddles, swinging into line to face the threat and Meathook Jabe hastily left the coach and galloped across to scream commands.

"Fire!" bellowed the Rio Kid, sending carbine slugs at the enemy.

BLASTS ripped at Torpy's ranks. Daly's tough miners, the horsemen in Union blue, all old soldiers, the wolf hunters howling blood-curdling challenges, made a frightening array as they tore down the slope into the outlaw vigilantes.

Bob Pryor glanced right and left, saw his friends locking in. Mike Reed fought with a frozen face, Yellowstone Kelly was laughing, while the Mexican's teeth gleamed in the bright light. Liver-Eating Johnson's wild beard bristled as he worked his rifle. Marcus Daly was singing encouragement to his boys.

Not far from the river bank, the Concord coach suddenly was turned by its drivers. Chasmer was running, and the wheels struck rocks in the stream bed, the vehicle crazily careening but holding upright. Between the Rio Kid and the banker stood the main forces of Meathook Jabe.

There was an audible crash as the two lines met. Hand-to-hand fighting began, Colts barking, shotguns roaring.

But this was not the kind of a scrap the outlaws fancied. As the determined Daly crew drove in, one after another of Torpy's killers turned to run, fleeing to the creek, hoping for escape.

The Rio Kid, shouting and waving to his comrades, managed to get lines started to the sides to sweep up prisoners. He was at the center, ripping through to confront Meathook Jabe, whose face was twisted with fury.

Beaten back to the river, howling pursuers at their heels, the outlaws were surrendering. The Rio Kid broke to the bank as Meathook Jabe faced him, Colt raised.

"Throw down!" shouted the Rio Kid.

Meathook cursed him, voice shrill from strain and hate. He tried for his foe and the bullet sang past Pryor's lowered head. A breath later the Rio Kid's steady pistol snapped its answer.

The dun rushed straight at Torpy's black, turning sideways as the two animals collided. Meathook essayed a savage swipe with his sharpened metal hook but the point missed as the Rio Kid pulled away, leaning over in his saddle. Jolted by Saber's contact with his mount, Torpy sought to bring his gun around but Bob Pryor beat him to the punch.

The stout field chief sagged and his arm dropped, his head down. The black horse shied from Saber's biting, kicking attack and Meathook fell off, a heap on the earth. . . .

The way clear, the Rio Kid whooped and signaled, splashing the dun into the creek on Chasmer's trail. The coach was on the east side and going full-speed for the tall timber. So swift had been the counter that Chasmer's bodyguard had been cut off or had deserted. Behind him the Rio Kid left the battle won as he tore after the banker.

There were two on the open seat, the driver and a shotgun man who kept looking back as the dun raced at his best speed, straight as an arrow on the

trail. The gap was rapidly diminishing. The shotgunner sent a load of buck back at the Rio Kid but the range was too long for the weapon, the pellets spreading wide and missing.

Pryor kept on, watching closely. Chasmer's head and shoulders showed from the open left window. The lantern-jawed boss gripped a large-caliber carbine but his aim was jolted by the wheels grinding over the uneven ground.

The Rio Kid pulled up close enough for pistol work. The shotgunner had reserved his second barrel for this and raised on him but the Rio Kid's Colt spoke first. The blast went into the air as the outlaw felt the burn of metal. A moment later Pryor sent a slug through the driver's hat.

The coach slewed around as the startled handler jerked his reins, coming to a screeching stop.

The two on the box seat jumped down and ran for a patch of rocks, deserting Chasmer.

A carbine bullet warned that Chasmer meant to duel it out. Mike Reed, the Rio Kid and others could swear to the banker's killings and perfidy. Once in the hands of decent elements, the jig would be up for Chasmer.

PRYOR caught the sheen of sunlight on the barrel thrust from a small rear window of the Concord.

"That wood's thick but it won't stop lead," he muttered, patterning the back of the coach with Colt bullets.

The carbine sagged. As he rode around the door opened and Chasmer fell out, but rose to his knees. He had a Derringer in one hand and his fishy eyes glared madly at the Rio Kid, who had run him down. With his last breath he sought to kill.

The Colt rapped out, the Derringer barking as though an echo but the Rio Kid's accurate aim had done the trick. Chasmer fell forward, a bluish hole showing over his nose.

* * * * *

The Rio Kid strolled over to Mike Reed, who was packing his few belongings in the A-1 yard.

"Where do yuh think yuh're goin'?" inquired Pryor.

The galvanized Yank swung to look him in the eye. He held out his hand.

"Yuh've won her fair and square, Rio Kid. Colonel Audley's saved and Marcus Daly will see to it these ranchers get their rights. Not to speak of yore havin' snatched me from death twice."

"What are yuh talkin' about?" demanded the Rio Kid although he knew very well. Harriet Audley was a beautiful, splendid prize, that most men would sacrifice anything for. He had thought of her, admired her, felt the beginning of true love for the girl.

The sudden hope in Reed's eyes was pathetic, eager. "Why, Harriet, of course. I'm—well, I don't savvy what to say."

The Rio Kid slapped him on the shoulder, grinning at him. "She's yours, Mike. Can't yuh see it, the way she looks at yuh? All yuh have to do is speak to her."

"Yuh mean it?"

"Of course. Luck to yuh, pard." . . .

It was not long before the Rio Kid and his trail companion, Celestino Mireles, rode from the A-1. Yellowstone Kelly was headed for a scouting expedition with the Army, and Liver-Eating Johnson meant to visit his two brothers.

Mike Reed stood, an arm about Harriet Audley, watching them, waving as they trotted their horses north on the valley trail, headed for the wilderness.

The Rio Kid swung to salute them, smiling as he returned to the dangers of the Frontier, the free life calling.

Further Adventures of the Rio Kid in

THE YELLOWSTONE EMPIRE

An Exciting Novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS Next Issue!

Satan's Gateway

By ROY VANDERGOOT

Volley after volley, the weapons were spitting death from the wagon fort

Lon Haskell's cavalry music makes the redskins show their dust!

ZACK EDALS, the husky wagon boss, came gigging his dun to the front of the wagon train where Lon Haskell was ceaselessly searching the sage-decked hills with his gray eyes. Dust stirred by the oxen drawing the creaking freight wagons had caked Lon's face, the sweat grooving tiny rivulets down his lean cheeks.

The dust settling on his shoulder-length hair hardly affected its color, but Edals' bushy black beard was streaked and gray with it. The wagon boss inhaled a chestful of air, spicy with

the sun-warmed sage.

"Wyomin' sure smells different from Illinois," he commented.

"Wait till yuh smell the Sioux," said Lon.

"Always seein' the funny side of it, eh, Mr. Haskell?"

"Oh, shore, always," Lon said drily.

"Kinda interestin' country," Edals observed.

"Especially nowadays," Lon said.

Edals' head came up quickly. "Why, you always got through and came back again, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Lon. Then after the briefest of pauses, "*I* did."

Edals shrugged his broad shoulders. "You're supposed to be a first-class scout. That's why Asa Aikman hired you at Leavenworth. The soldier-man said you always got the wagons through."

"They didn't have our kind of weight," Lon said.

"Why, what's so special about flour and sugar and bacon, bolts of cloth, shoes and boots and shirts and pants and some other kind of store stuff, and maybe a few barrels of whisky."

"As welcome as lead and powder and guns to the Injuns," declared Lon. "Especially now with Sheridan and Crook hot on the tails of Sittin' Bull and Crazy Hoss. The Sioux won't have much time for the hunt. But it wasn't the goods I was thinkin' of."

"Oh," said the wagon boss, his tone changing utterly. "You mean Eve?"

"Indians are sort of partial to long blonde hair."

Edals grunted.

"If her father hadn't died," Lon said, "I might have talked him into lettin' the girl stay at Fort Laramie till this Injun ruckus is settled. But I had no chance to arrange it, he died so sudden."

"He was ailin'," Edals said. "But he wouldn't let on."

"What possessed him to come West, sick as he was?" Lon asked irritably.

Edals shrugged. "Profits. With Jim Bridgers' trading post on the Black Fork of the Green River taken over by the Mormons there's a chance to make some quick money by a wide-awake trader in that country."

"Or get a quick hair-lift," said Lon.

Edals had no comment to that and Lon went on:

"I tried to talk her into stayin' at Laramie—told her we could take the stuff out there and get a post started."

"Maybe she didn't trust us," observed Edals.

"My reputation"—Lon bridled—"is known all along the trail!"

"Could be," said Edals, "she figured you mightn't live long enough."

THE way he said that caused Lon to take his eyes from the hills and lay them on the stocky wagon boss. Edals' cool blue eyes were bland, his ruddy face expressionless. Maybe, Lon thought, he had imagined a double meaning in the man's words.

"Well, there's *you*," he said.

"She don't know me from Adam," Edals said.

That took Lon by surprise. Somehow he had thought that the Aikmans had known Edals back East. It wasn't good manners to ask personal questions, but before Lon could check himself he had blurted out:

"How come Aikman hired yuh, sight unseen?"

The faintest of smiles, or maybe it was the ghost of a sneer, twisted across Edals' face.

"He could get me cheap—transportation and grub. And I know wagons and oxen."

"Ummm," grunted Lon. He thought, "Yuh may know wagons and oxen, mister, but yuh don't know a lot about freightin'."

He waited for Edals to say more, but the stocky wagon boss had sunk into a moody silence.

The moments ran on. Behind them was the creaking of the heavily laden Bains-Murphy wagons with their six-inch-wide wheels and half-inch-thick iron tires. The breathing of the plodding oxen was as deep as the sighing of a blacksmith's bellows. After weeks and weeks of it, a man hardly noticed it any more, Lon thought.

He let his eyes scan the periphery of the hills, dry and sere under the summer sun. The air was shimmery but clear, and the eye could run a long way where no hill obstructed the view. Unless a man were used to this, his estimates of distances were often ludicrous.

Swiveling in the saddle, Lon looked back. Behind the four freight wagons rolled the canvas-topped Conestoga containing the Aikman household gear, and

Eve Aikman. Tied to the tailgate, the riding horse walked with drooping head, its black hide almost as gray with dust as the Conestoga's soiled canvas.

All four bullwhackers drowsed on the seats. Two of the swampers rode with them, but a third one was walking, tired of the constant jolting. The fourth swamper was driving the Conestoga, having taken the place of Asa Aikman.

Ten men altogether—a weak force to venture into Sioux country right now, Lon thought. He felt uneasiness rise in him and turned again to scan the hills.

The Sioux were reported to be up in the Yellowstone country, but that didn't mean stray war parties might not be encountered along the Sweetwater.

There were two sound reasons why Lon hadn't quit this fool's errand flat at Fort Laramie. He had been hired to see the wagons through to the Oregon cut-off in the valley of the Little Sandy, and Lon didn't go back on his word. The second reason was even better—Eve Aikman.

When Lon had hired on at Leavenworth, he had fully expected to find opportunity for their train to join a larger one at Fort Laramie, or maybe some soldiers would be going to Oregon or California. But the Sioux war had knocked that plan into a cocked hat.

Unable to sway Eve from her plan to make her father's dream come true, Lon had stood by her. He often wondered how such a slip of a girl could be so grimly determined. The funny part was that she didn't look grim and determined; she looked soft and feminine, and as if she could be easily persuaded.

Well, he had found out differently. Sometimes he had the feeling that Zack Edals had worked against him. He wished he knew more about the man.

His horse's stepping into a prairie dog hole nearly spilled Lon. He snatched at the saddle-horn to hang on. The horse recovered and seemed none the worse.

Edals laughed out loud.

"I think those over-sized gophers out here are more dangerous than the Sioux," he remarked

"Wait till you meet the Sioux," said Lon.

"I figger you worry too much," retorted the stocky wagon boss.

"I wouldn't call it worry," Lon said. "After yuh've been in the West as long as I have yuh learn to be cautious."

"You talk like you're an old man."

Lon's face relaxed. "Reckon I started pretty young," he admitted. Reminiscence crept into his gray eyes. "I tried to enlist in 'Sixty-one," he told the wagon boss. "They wouldn't take me. So I ran away from home and got a job with Russell, Majors and Waddell of the Central Overland. I was fourteen then."

"Got a job ridin' Pony Express, did you?" queried Edals.

"Nope. I was light enough—tipped the scales at hundred and ten—but I reckon I looked too green. They gave me a job station-tendin'."

"Station tendin', huh? Ever met Slade—Jack Slade?"

"I met him," Lon said.

EDALS looked up at the new note in the scout's voice.

"Tough hombre, wasn't he?"

Lon shrugged. "Some people thought so."

"Did he really arrest four horse thieves single-handed?"

"He did."

"And he cut both ears off Jules Reni? The feller what Julesburg was named after?"

"He did."

"Maybe you was there and saw him do it?"

"I was."

"Is that right!" said Edals. He was all interest now. His eyes, blue as Platte river ice reflecting a December sky, held a hard glitter. "I heard," he said tensely, "he had Jules tied to a corral post and shot him to death, shooting slow and in parts of the body so that Jules took a long time dying. He must've died several times from fear before he really cashed in his chips. Then Slade cut off his ears and carried 'em around in his pockets."

"Something like that," said Lon.

"How come you fellers stood around and let Slade dō that to Jules?"

Lon turned his cool gray eyes on the wagon boss. "Mister," he said distantly, "Slade had a score to settle with Jules. Two years before, Jules shot Slade when Slade wasn't armed. He put five slugs from his six-gun into Slade. Then, while Slade lay writhin' on the ground, Jules got a shotgun and fired a load of buckshot into him. Jules

told us, 'When he dies, put him in that packin' case and bury him.' Slade spoke right back at him. 'I won't die,' he says. 'I'm goin' to live to wear yore ears on my watch chain.' He did, too. Slade had thirteen pieces of lead in him when we took him to the doctor. The sawbones dug out five slugs. The rest Slade carried around with him till he died."

"On March tenth, Eighteen-sixty-four, wasn't it?" Edals said. It was a statement, not a question.

"I see that yuh're plumb well informed," said Lon.

"Well enough, I reckon. And so the Montana Vigilantes hanged him from a corral gate in Virginia City. Why?"

"Because he was tough and rowdy and was suspected of bein' in with the Plummer gang."

"That was suspicion, not proof."

"He was warned to get out of town."

"He was, was he? Maybe you were there to help serve the warnin'?"

Lon was suddenly aware that this was no longer the talk of a man who was merely inquisitive. There was more in this than just morbid curiosity.

"Mebbe I was," Lon said cautiously.

"And you helped hang him?"

Lon looked the wagon boss square in the eye. "Ever seen a man hanged, mister?"

"No."

"I thought not."

"But maybe I'll live long enough to see one dangle."

"The country is still plenty tough," Lon said. "Mebbe yuh'll get that chance, mister."

Edals seemed to take a deep breath. Then he said, "His full name was Joseph A. Slade. He was my brother."

"Yore brother?" Lon exclaimed. "But how? Yore name—"

"Just read it backwards," E d a l s said. . . .

The wagon boss had dropped back to the Conestoga. Lon noticed him slapping the dust off the saddle horse and putting on Eve's side-saddle. Presently Eve came out of the wagon and the stocky man helped her mount. Then they rode off aside so they were free of the dust and Lon could see the wagon boss talking earnestly to the girl.

A pang of jealousy assailed Lon. He had for the past few weeks known that his interest in Eve Aikman had passed the point of his wishing to help a lone girl. If he needed further proof, his present jealous feeling was ample.

He forced his mind away from what was happening in back of him to concentrate on a matter in front of him which had held his attention for the past hour. They were almost opposite the spot now, and Lon was hoping they would pass it undetected when the swamper who was walking let out a shout:

"Look!"

FROM back of a low hummock a buzzard had risen, was winging upward to join its mates circling high above.

"Somethin' dead there!" yelled the swamper.

Lon cursed the man under his breath. He had hoped they would pull past, then he could go back to see what it was that had attracted the buzzards. He hadn't wanted these people to become alarmed by what might lie back of that hummock. He had seen things on the plains that would blanch the face of the hardiest of mountainmen, let alone what it would do to the courage of these Illinois farmhands who had never been west of the Missouri.

But now it was too late. All the men were wide-awake now. With one accord the train had come to a halt.

Lon reined his pony toward the hummock. Behind him the bullwhackers were coming off their wagons, their boredom falling from them as if by magic. Eve and Slade were coming fast on their horses.

A dead horse was the first thing Lon saw. Then he saw a man, and thought him dead, too. Then the man moved his head. He lay with his right leg pinned beneath the horse. The horse had stepped in a prairie dog hole and had broken its leg. The man had shot it, to prevent its movements from further damaging his leg.

This Lon saw in that one encompassing glance, and he also saw that the man had tried to free his leg by digging and had failed. And then he saw the man's face.

For one brief moment the impact of that recognition left Lon's face blank. Then it changed. It turned into a grim mask, but in his cool gray eyes crept a look of almost unholy satisfaction.

"You!" Lon said.

"Ditto," replied the man.

His voice sounded hoarse, as if thirst had affected his vocal cords. His eyes, black as an Indian's, were on Lon with a hard, almost sneering defiance. There was not a trace of fear in them, nor was there fear on his high-cheeked, coppery face. No hat was visible. His long black hair was shoulder-length. He was clean-shaven like Lon. He wore buckskin and his left foot sticking up from the horse's side was encased in a beaded moccasin.

"A hossman like you—" said Lon.

The man's shoulder muscles jerked in an attempted shrug. "There's always a first time."

"How plumb true that is," replied Lon, and the meaning contained in that brief expression set a glitter alight in the other man's black eyes.

The wounded man's six-gun, with which he had shot his horse, lay close at hand.

"Shall we shoot it out, bucko?" the man said, his lips barely moving, and Lon couldn't help admiring his courage.

Then the others were upon them. The man lifted his black eyes to them, then looked back to Lon, a thin smile around his colorless lips.

"Not this time, I guess," he said, and took his eyes and his smile away from Lon again, to place them upon Eve Aikman who from her pony looked down at him with pity brimming her big blue eyes.

"How do you do, ma'am," the man said. "Please excuse my not rising." It was most effective."

"Oh, you poor, poor man!" Eve breathed. "How brave! Help him quick, Lon."

"I'll help him all right," Lon said grimly.

Slade had come from the saddle. "Lucky for you we happened along," he told the man.

The fellow lifted sardonic black eyes to Lon. "I trust the sentiment is unanimous?"

Eve's eyes went from one man to the other. Utter amazement was reflected in her delicate features. Rimmed by the crisply neat sunbonnet in which blonde curls wrought a golden frame, her face was like that of a puzzled child.

"That's a beautiful dress you're wearing, ma'am," the man complimented her. "It befits you."

The dress was only calico, but that wasn't the point. It was his gallantry and his amazing courage that counted. Eve's eyes filmed, her cheeks flushed.

"Thank you," she murmured.

Lon grated his teeth. He thought, "One more compliment like that and she'll fall head over heels in love with him." He turned to the men crowding around. "All right, boys—lift that hoss. One of yuh drag him out."

"Why don't *you* pull him out?" Eve said sharply. "Are you just going to stand there and do nothing for that poor man?"

"That's all right, ma'am. He don't want to touch me. He hates me."

"Hates you?" the girl cried.

THEY had gotten the swarthy man out from under the horse now and he sat up, gingerly feeling his leg.

"Anyhow," he said, "it isn't broken."

"Good!" said Lon. "Then yuh can kick better when yuh do yore little dance."

"Or kick you in the teeth better!" snarled the other man, unable longer to curb the viciousness boiling up inside him.

Silence followed that flare-up of temper. Then Eve asked:

"Dance? What does Lon mean?"

"He means he plans to hang me, ma'am."

"Hang you? Oh, how brutal! But why? Why does he hate you so?"

Before Lon could answer that, the man himself did.

"It's an unpleasant story, ma'am. I'd much rather not mention it, but I'm afraid I must. There was a beautiful young Indian girl that Lon wanted. She wouldn't have anything to do with him, knowing him for what he was. I had to forcible restrain him from—"

"Why, yuh dirty liar!" Lon grated.

"How horrible!" the girl exclaimed.

"He's lyin', Miss Eve," Lon told her grimly. "He's tryin' to save his worthless life by lyin', by workin' on yore sympathy."

"I knew he would deny it." The swarthy man sighed wearily.

Lon's face was white with fury. But even in his rage he had to admire the fellow's unmitigated gall and nerve.

Lon turned to face Eve. Pointing a scornful finger at his accuser he said:

"This man's name is 'Breed' Parli.

His father was a French-Canadian trapper, his mother a Crow squaw. Parli is the leader of a bunch of renegade Crow Indians. He is the worst renegade of them all. His hands are stained with gore. He has killed more settlers and prospectors and freighters, *and* women and children, than any man of his stripe in the West. The Army has wanted him for years. So have all the other whites in this part of the country. Not to mention the Sioux Indians, because he and his renegades have made bitter war on 'em. He should have been hung long ago."

The wagon train people had listened in awed silence. Eve looked from one to the other, indecision reflected on her face. Clearly she didn't know whom to believe.

"Never," spoke up Parli, "has an innocent man's name been besmirched by blacker lies." Even his voice carried a sad note, the long-suffering of outraged dignity. It worked again.

"But—but how could he be the sort of man Lon says he is!" Eve cried out. "He—he sounds so well educated. He speaks such good English. He—he—" She faltered.

Lon filled out for her: "He makes such nice compliments."

It was a mistake. The girl bristled. "He talks like a gentleman," she said pointedly.

"He was educated like one," snapped Lon. "At one of the best schools back East. His father spent a fortune on him. It was wasted. Worse—it only made his renegade mind keener. His education was one of the worst things that ever happened to white men or red."

"I stand most wrongly accused," lamented Parli.

"Don't worry," said Lon. "We'll hang yuh right."

"I shall bear my lot with equanimity."

"So will the rope," said Lon. "All right, boys—some of yuh outspan the oxen from one of the wagons and raise the tongue. Take the stoutest one. We don't want this to fizzle on us."

"No!" cried Eve. "I forbid it. You men hear me? I forbid this—this ghastly miscarriage of justice!" Her voice was shrill, her eyes flashed. She looked daggers at Lon.

"Somebody unroll that buffalo robe on his hoss," Lon said. "Mebbe we'll find somethin' that'll back me up. Yuh notice"—he was looking at Eve—"that there ain't any saddle on his hoss. Just a blanket and a rawhide strap around the hoss with a loop on each side to put the feet in. No bridle and bit, but a rawhide loop in the hoss' mouth, just like the Indians use."

"True," admitted Parli, "it's an Indian pony. A man can't be hanged for riding a horse he's found running loose on the prairie."

"Found?" Lon laughed shortly. "A man of yore learnin' should know the difference between found and stole."

A TEAMSTER had unrolled the robe. A stubby bow and several arrows, an extra pair of moccasins, a tomahawk, an Army bugle spilled out. And something else!

"Scalps!" yelled the teamster, backing away from the black-hairy, bloody things.

"Sioux scalps," Lon said grimly. "But they might have been from white folks."

"How was I to know they were in there?" Parli said. "I told you I found that pony."

"Yuh mean to tell me yuh picked up this pony and never looked into that buffalo robe?" Lon flung at him.

"Didn't have time," explained Parli. The gleam in his black eyes could have been malicious satisfaction at his own cleverness in checkmating an opponent, or it could have been deadly hatred. "I didn't get time. The Sioux were hot after me."

"And why would the Sioux be hot after yuh?" sneered Lon.

"You know why," retorted Parli. "They hate all Cro—" He quickly corrected himself. "They hate all white men these days."

Parli's black eyes flamed hatred at Lon. He bared his teeth, and for a moment his cloak of decency fell from him, allowing the dark monster beneath to be seen.

To Lon's amazement Eve spoke up.

"All that we have seen is still circumstantial evidence. This man must be judged by a jury. We cannot take justice into our own hands."

"Why not?" snapped Lon.

He was so irked that he failed to see Eve had swerved her opinion his way. He suddenly thought of something. He turned to the wagon boss.

"Slade, you must have heard of Breed Parli, haven't yuh?"

Slade's mouth clamped tight. He looked as if he were carefully weighing something in his mind.

"Slade?" Eve said. "What do you mean, Slade? His name is—"

"Edals," interrupted Lon. "Slade read backwards. He wanted to keep his real name secret. He came West to find out some things about his brother."

"Not a brother of Jack Slade, by chance?" said Parli. He left off rubbing his aching leg.

Zack Slade nodded. "That's right, *friend.*"

"Well, what do you know!" smirked Parli. "Slade's brother, and Lon Haskell. Say, mister, why don't you ask where Lon was on the tenth of March, Eighteen-sixty-four? He and John Lott and X. Biedler and Cap Williams. All are right handy with a rope, and Lon is the handiest of them all. And he still seems to love a length of hemp." Pointing a dramatic finger at Lon, Parli accused: "There stands the man who helped hang your brother, Slade!"

When the wagon boss made no move, Parli said, "Well, aren't you going to kill him?"

Slade shook his head. "Not till I have helped him hang you, *friend.*"

Parli had opened his mouth to retort when the teamster who had opened the bundle called:

"Here's somethin' else fell out that buffler robe."

Lon took one look at the thing the bullwhacker had discovered. The sight of it hit him like a blow.

"Holy smoke!" he exclaimed. "Now we *are* in for trouble!"

The evident dismay in his voice drew all eyes to him.

"What do you mean?" Slade asked.

"That," said Lon, nodding at the thing the bullwhacker was holding, "is a Sioux tribe's medicine bundle. It's sacred to 'em."

"This?" jeered the teamster. "Sacred? Shucks, it's nothin' but a dirty little buckskin sack. It looks old as Methuselah!"

"It *is* old," explained Lon. "It's the oldest thing the tribe possesses. Around it is woven all their lore and legend, witchcraft and superstition. They hold it in high veneration."

"So help me!" gibed Parli. "A scholar, if not a gentleman."

Lon ignored the sneer.

"Shucks," the bullwhacker said, "nothin' in this old bag but some feathers, some sticks and stones, a piece of buffler hide, a clod of dirt and some other junk."

"Shore," explained Lon, "and all of it plenty important to them. It's as sacred to the Sioux as an altar in a church to other folks. Havin' it fall into white men's hands is about the worst thing that could happen. Not just because they think it's holy, but it might mean death to the tribe." He whirled on Parli. "How in the world did yuh ever manage to get hold of that?"

PARLI only shrugged and smiled in a way that indicated he was aware of his mental superiority.

"What did he steal it for?" asked Slade.

"So the Crows can practise witchcraft with it on their enemies," Lon said shortly. "To the Crows it would be the same as if Parli took coup on the tribe he stole it from. If the Sioux ever catch *us* with it, they'll try to kill us to the last man!"

"Why not give it back to them?" asked Eve.

"That wouldn't be enough," explained Lon. "They'd still figger we'd probably already used it to cast a spell on 'em."

"Let's throw it away then," she said anxiously.

"And keep Parli with us?" asked Lon. "We're almost shore to run into the Sioux. They won't give up the hunt for their medicine bundle easy. These scalps are fresh. The tribe this medicine bundle was stolen from can't be far away. And if yuh've never seen a plumb mad Indian witch doctor yuh've never seen anybody worked to a frenzy. With either the medicine bag or Parli with us, we get killed when we meet up with the Sioux. Even if it ain't a war party out to finish off all the white men they can."

"We could hide Parli," Eve persisted.

"We can't take the chance. The Sioux will search our wagons. They'd find him."

"Maybe we had better let Parli go free then," suggested Eve. "Give him a horse and let him ride off with that horrible thing."

"Shore," said Lon. "And take a

chance on the Sioux catchin' him, ridin' one of our hosses. And Parli'll be only too glad to tell them we gave the hoss to him so's he could get away with the medicine bundle. Oh, no, we ain't takin' any chances like that!"

"Then what can we do?"

"Get rid of Parli and the bundle permanent. Bury 'em both, hide the spot as well as we can, and pray the Sioux won't find it. They suspect somethin's been buried any place, they'll shore dig it out."

"You mean, hang him?" Eve said in a horrified voice. "No, no! That—that would be murder!"

"It would be the same to expose us to the Sioux," retorted Lon. "And he should have been hung long ago. I'll take the responsibility of sentencin' him. As soon as we meet up with the military, you can deliver me to 'em, tellin' 'em I killed Parli. And if you folks think hangin' is so awful, why, I'll shoot him. Just walk back to the wagons and leave me here alone with him."

"No, no!" cried Eve again, white-faced. She looked at Lon with loathing in her eyes. "You—you're terrible!"

"With the lives of ten people in my keepin'," replied Lon, "I don't mind bein' terrible."

"I won't have it!" cried the girl.

"We'll vote on it," countered Lon. "All right, boys—what's the verdict?"

"Kill him," Slade said promptly.

Some of the men supported him with definite answers.

"Waal, I dunno if we oughter," one of them muttered.

The remainder said they reckoned there was no other way.

"No!" Eve screamed. "No, Lon—you can't do it!"

"The majority has decided," Lon said harshly. "Now, all of yuh get away from here." He put his hand on his gun.

It was then that Parli acted. The six-gun with which he had killed his horse had been picked up by one of the men, but the bow and arrows lay within his reach. Like a striking snake he snatched them up and before the others grasped his intentions he had an arrow nocked and, pulling back the buffalo sinew cord, he had the arrow aimed at Eve.

"One move, and the lady dies!"

Lon's gun hand froze.

"*I've* got a different plan, *and* a better one," Parli said. "Right from here we turn the wagons north for the Crow nation. We reach them, we're safe."

Lon snorted. "Yuh mean you'll be safe!"

"You have ten seconds to make up your mind and give me your word that you won't harm me." Parli gave his ultimatum.

Eve surprised Lon then. "Don't give it to him, Lon. I'm not afraid to die if it'll save the rest of you. Don't give in to him!"

"I've got to," Lon said. He nodded at Parli. "All right, yuh've got my word."

Parli grinned and lowered the weapon. Slade jerked out his six-gun. Lon slapped up his hand.

"No! I've given my word!"

"You're a fool!" the wagon boss flung at him.

"Yes," said Lon. "I'm a fool."

They rounded the Granite Mountains that afternoon. After filling all barrels at the Sweetwater they swung due north and left that stream behind them. They made a dry camp that night and by noon of the following day struck the headwaters of Muskrat Creek.

With the snow-caps of the Wind River Range far in the distance to their left, they rolled up Muskrat Creek all that day and most of the next. Where the Muskrat bent toward the northwest, they left it to strike northeast for the east fork of the Bighorn.

This was strange territory to Lon. The land was dry and hilly and far off the beaten track. No prairie schooners had ever rolled across this barren sod. Only the *travois* of Indian villages on the move had marked a pole-dragged spoor here, now long erased by wind and rain. Perhaps the pack animals of the old-time trappers and mountainmen, Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez, "Black" Harris and Fontenelle, maybe "Cap" Bonneville had trod this region. But of late no white man's eyes had scanned these lonesome hills.

Parli guided them unerringly to water and to such grass as the creek bottoms afforded. No hesitation marred his progress. He knew where he was going and that, Lon guessed, was the Buffalo Fork of the Powder. From there to the North Fork and then across to the headwaters of Crazy Woman Creek. That would

take them into the heart of the Crow nation.

But there was an urgency in the renegade, marking his eagerness to get away from what might be following behind. The same uneasiness possessed Lon. It revealed itself when Slade rode up to ask:

"Well, Lon, reckon we've given the Sioux the slip?"

Lon shook his head. "Not if they don't want to let us," he said soberly. "I left that medicine bundle with Parli's dead hoss with the slim hope it might satisfy 'em. But I don't reckon it will. They'll want their vengeance on Parli, anyhow. Even if he hadn't stole their magic bundle, they'd still want him. They'll recognize the hoss as his. He might even have stolen it from 'em."

"Maybe we ought to have buried it," suggested Slade.

"No good," said Lon. "The wolves and coyotes would have dug it up again. The buzzards would tell the Sioux where it was. It would have been a waste of time."

"They can track us easily, can't they?" asked Slade, looking back over the wagons' spoor.

"Like a lobo trails a wounded buffalo," said Lon.

"Why don't we leave the wagons and travel faster?"

"And reach Parli's renegade Crows faster?" asked Lon.

"That's right." Slade nodded. "It wouldn't do us any good, would it? But why don't Parli urge us to? Or why don't he try to steal one of our horses and make a run for it?"

"In the first place," replied Lon, "his leg still bothers him bad. But mostly I think it's because he hopes to get the wagons to the band he runs with. That would be a feather in his cap. And he needs that now that he's lost the medicine bundle."

"He's a nervy devil, isn't he?"

"Never seen the likes of him," admitted Lon.

"Was it true what you said about him?"

"Every word, and more."

The stocky wagon boss made a growling noise, and when Lon looked at him he saw that Slade's face was bleak and wholly without mercy. Slade's eyes were on Parli who was riding atop one of the wagons, scanning the back trail. What Lon read on Slade's face told him that though he himself had given his word not to harm the renegade breed, no such scruples bothered the wagon boss. Lon had a feeling then that Parli's days were counted.

Slade's eyes came back to Lon. "By the way, why did you pick up that old Army bugle Parli had with him?"

"The bugle?" Lon shrugged. "Kept it for a souvenir mebbe."

"I see," said Slade.

A little later he dropped back to the Conestoga, leaving Lon to wrestle with a stubborn jealousy.

NOT half an hour later that Pardi shouted:

"Here they come!"

There was no need to ask him who was coming. His face showed they were no friends of his. Lon looked where Pardi was looking and saw a group of horsemen he estimated around thirty or forty strong on the crest of a distant hill. Down the slope they raced, to dip from sight behind a sage-grown ridge.

"Draw the wagons up in a square!" Lon shouted.

The bullwhackers hastened to obey the order. The result was a stout little fort.

"Get the oxen hid back of that hill!" Lon ordered. "Unload some freight and plug up the open spaces under the wagons. We'll give 'em a hot welcome, men!"

Eve was coming up to Lon. She was carrying her father's old brass-bound Hawkins. Lon grinned at her.

"Ready for 'em, I see."

"Yes, Lon." Her face was pale, but her hands were steady.

"Scared?" Lon asked.

"No . . . Yes, I am, too. But I won't show it."

"That's the girl!" Lon applauded. "Mebbe we can save the oxen. Indians don't care for 'em. Mules would be a different proposition."

She wasn't fooled. "Any chance of help coming, Lon?"

He thought then that maybe it would only be cruel to arouse false hopes. But he told her:

"About eighty miles from here to Fort Reno up the Powder. Unless a detachment happened to be out this way—" He shrugged. "Slim chance, I reckon."

A commotion beside the Conestoga

took Lon's eyes there. He saw Slade make a leap for Parli who had slipped off the wagon and was trying to get aboard Eve's horse. The wagon boss' fist clouted the renegade under the chin and he tumbled backward, knocked out by that one wicked blow.

"Tryin' to sneak away, huh?" Slade growled.

"Tie him up and chuck him in the wagon!" Lon called.

"I know somethin' better than that," argued Slade. He tied Pardi's hands and feet, then stuffed him next to some sacks of flour under a wagon. "Maybe he'll stop a bullet," the wagon boss growled. "I hope so."

"I better get my Spencer," Lou said to Eve, and stepped up to the Conestoga. As he pulled the weapon out from under the robe, the bugle fell on the ground.

Lon stared at it, then picked it up and held it and stood still in a brown study a moment or two. One of the men was hauling a bolt of canvas from one of the wagons to plug a hole with. Lon put his Spencer back in the Conestoga.

"Let me have that," he said to the man.

He walked with the bolt of canvas to his horse and put it in front of the saddle. Haste prodded him now. The Sioux were still out of sight behind the ridge, but might pop up at any moment.

With a jerk of his head Lon called Slade and stood in earnest conversation with him for a brief moment.

"You know what'll happen to you when they catch you out there," Slade said.

"You tell the men," said Lon. "I've got to get behind that hill before the Sioux spot me. And Slade, if things don't go right, you know what to do about Eve."

"Yes," said Slade. "I know." His voice was tight.

"Another thing," Lon said. "I didn't hang yore brother."

"If you had," said Slade, "I know now that Jack would have deserved it." He held out his hand. "Luck, fellow!"

"Luck," said Lon, and mounted and rode quickly away from the wagons.

He heard Eve's cry of dismay, but did not turn his head or wave at her. Slade would explain things to her, and Slade would be with her when the Sioux attacked. It brought a pang to Lon's heart.

Behind the hill where the oxen were hidden, Lon unrolled the bolt of canvas. One end he fastened to his saddle-horn and to the other end he secured several of the oxen's harness chains. Then he remounted, the bugle in hand, and waited.

The wait was brief. From beyond the wagon fort the Sioux warwhoops shredded the sun-warm silence. From the wagons rifles and six-guns hurled defiance at the yelling savages.

Lon dug his heels in his mount's flanks. The horse raced away, the canvas scouring the dry sod and the chains churning and plunging behind, uprooting sagebrush and tangling the brush, pulling it like flailing brooms behind him. The panicked oxen stampeded. Dust rose in billows and kept rising.

LON lifted the bugle to his lips, and the clarion notes of the "Charge" leaped across the hill to fling its challenge at the attacking foe and spread confusion in their midst. Volley after volley, the rifles were spitting death from the wagon fort. Farther to the left, a sharp cracking of carbines penetrated the uproar.

When Lon gained the hill, the Sioux were in full flight. And, to Lon's amazement, a detachment of U. S cavalry was in hot pursuit. Soon the soldiers turned back. The fleeing Indians were too fast for them.

There were only a half dozen of the troopers, a beardless shavetail leading them. They came trotting up to the wagons where Lon had dismounted, the wagon crew crowding around him and slapping him on the back. Eve ran to lay a trembling hand on his arm.

"Lon, that—that was brave!"

He grinned at her. The troopers had halted and the shavetail asked, looking at the gear dragging from Lon's saddle with blank amazement in his eyes:

"Where are the troops!"

"Troops?" echoed Lon. "Right here, Lieutenant." He showed the bugle.

"You mean—" The shavetail blanched. "Man! We've hung on the flank of that Sioux band for the past two hours. When we heard that bugle we thought for sure that Colonel Mason had come up to hit them in the flank. There must have been at least fifty of them. You realize, mister, that if your strategy hadn't worked they would have butchered us?"

"Well"—Lon grinned—"it worked."

The color returned to the young officer's unweathered cheeks.

"That's something to talk about at mess," he murmured.

"And write home about," thought Lon. Aloud he said, "We've got something else for yuh to talk about, Lieutenant. We've got a captive."

"A Sioux?" queried the soldier quickly. "A chief, perhaps?"

"Better than that," said Lon. "We've got Breed Parli."

"No!" yelped the lieutenant. "Listen, mister! Would you mind my taking him in? Colonel Mason is camped ten miles from here on the Badwater. If I could bring Parli in—" He hesitated, then plunged. "I've got a girl back East, a girl almost as beautiful as your wife, sir. A promotion would mean a lot to me."

"Lieutenant"—Lon laughed—"Breed Parli is yours!" He put an arm around Eve's shoulders. "It gives us great pleasure to present him to yuh."

Zack Slade let out a shout. "All right, men—all right! Let's inspan. We're pullin' on for the Badwater."

LON glanced at him and Slade clasped both of his own hands to shake congratulations at Lon. The lieutenant had come from the saddle to take a peek at his prize.

"There's somethin' I want to tell yuh," Lon said to Eve. "I didn't help hang Slade's brother. There was a young feller who was sorry for his part in it the next day. He was afraid his mother might hear of it. He was about my size and build, so I let on it was me."

"Why, Lon, that was wonderful."

"Me helpin' with the hangin', yuh mean?"

"You know what I mean," she said.

"Never was good at guessin'. Mebbe that shavetail's better at it. Yuh hear what he said?"

"I heard," she said softly.

"Me, too," said Lon.

How the Town Was Named

SOME folks are still sore about it but as far as the post office is concerned it's still Waverly, Iowa. It was in the 1870s that this community was settled and began to give signs of prosperous growth. Folks got together and decided it was time for a municipal christening. A leading pioneer of the settlement had been a man named Harmon and it was unanimously agreed that the town should bear his name.

Plans were made for a lavish ceremony and the mayor prepared to give one of his best exhibitions of oratory. Many speakers practice their vowels. This orator felt he achieved the best results by reading aloud the fine rounded phrases of Sir Walter Scott and so he spent the morning prior to the ceremony reading that novelist's "Waverly."

orations about the coming grandeurs of the town. xuberant fellers fired their guns, officials delivered

The band played, the kids screamed, a few e At last it was the mayor's turn to speak.

With the flavor of Sir Walter Scott still on his tongue he praised the achievements already made by his fine fellow townsmen and assured them he would be in there pitching in the future. This fine town would grow until it became the metropolis of the entire West, and now "By the powers invested in me through these kind, intelligent people I pronounce the name of this town to be for all time—Waverly."

There was consternation on the faces of those sitting on the platform and of those milling about. The mayor's face was reddest of all, but. . . .

So if you have any friends in Harmon, Iowa, be sure to address them at Waverly, Iowa, when next you write!

—*Simpson M. Ritter*

Solo Smith is probably the world's worst pistol shot, but his aim improves when outlaws stalk the Benton ranch!

Solo's shot knocked the gun out of Al Swett's hand

By JOHN H. LATHAM

Hell on a .44 Frame

THE little flurry of shots, distance-muted and washed away on the vast sounding-board of the night, roused scant interest in Solo Smith.

The puncher had quit the big Skillet outfit that morning. He'd told the wagon boss he was going to see the bright lights south of the Border. Drink some good whisky to take the taste of cow-track dew and branch water out of his mouth. He'd chase a few Spanish dons' daughters instead of brush-wild *ladinos*.

After two years of fence-patchin' and mesquite-poppin' and riding the rough string, Solo figured to pull himself a high lonesome.

"Just don't try to shoot up the town," had been Gus Everts' parting advice.

Solo had grinned at that. He was one of the worst shots in Texas, and knew

it. His fingers were all thumbs when it came to handling a six-gun, and he had taken a lot of spur-jingling josh from the Skillet crew about his inability to hit anything smaller than a barn with an aimed bullet.

That night the puncher was forty miles south of the Skillet ranch, with a yellow Texas moon riding the ridges beside him. He had a wad of back pay in his pockets, a good horse and a new saddle under him. Once or twice he heard the far-out whisper of running hoofs, but that meant nothing to him. Willows cast freckled shadows on the Rio Bonita and coyotes barked up in the hills. In the rush-weeds along the river, frogs bellowed like range bulls and Solo sang back at them.

"Oh, my lover is a cowboy,
Wild broncs he does break,
He has promised he'd quit it
Just for my sake!
He ties up one foot
And his saddle—"

The song ended abruptly as the little cowpony whirled back from something there in the trail. Solo nudged the horse with spurs, but it stood stock-still, muscles bunched and quivering. A warning sensation rubbed at the puncher's nerve ends. Leaning forward in the saddle to see what had spooked the bronc, he made out a dark shape sprawled across the trail.

Now he remembered the shots, and a cold hand seemed to grip his heart and squeeze it dry. Riding a few yards down the trail, he tied the pony to a clump of buckbrush. Then, with hammering heart, he cautiously approached the inert form lying with arms akimbo in the hoof-cut dust.

CAUTION was unnecessary. Shot twice in the back, the man was dead. The shock of that left Solo's knees weak. He squatted beside the body, with a chill feeling that somebody was watching him over the sights of a high-powered rifle.

But the minutes passed and nothing happened so the dread gradually lessened. Finally, he struck a match on his spur shank for a look at the dead man's face.

The light, cupped in his hands, bloomed downward upon dark, swarthy features nicked with little scars. The man had been about thirty, Solo judged, a hard, handsome rascal who rode a long stirrup. Solo took another look at the set, still face and wanted to go off somewhere and get sick. He doused the light and fumbled for the makings.

His hand came away from his shirt pocket empty, and he was searching through his chaps and cowhide vest when he remembered lending his tobacco to the wagon boss back at the Skillet roundup camp.

"I reckon Gus kept it," he thought, and noticed the tag sticking out of the dead man's pocket.

Solo was a chain-smoker, and right now he needed a quirly to quiet his nerves. He gingerly extracted the makings from a blood-soaked pocket. There were no papers, but the man's chaps yielded a torn piece of brown wrapping paper.

Solo spilled tobacco into the folded paper, which was torn to about cigarette size. He licked the paper and crimped it, and struck a match on the dead man's boot. He was cupping the flame to the cigarette when a girl's cold, brittle voice sounded from the brush behind him.

"Hands up, you back-shooting *pelado*. *Andale,* before I blow you loose from your backbone!"

It was like having a red-hot branding iron jammed suddenly against his spine. Fear tore through him like a knife. He dropped the match, his breath expelling violently in the crowding darkness, and his nerves quivered while he waited for the girl to come out of the brush.

A light step sounded behind him. There was a whisper of metal rubbing leather as his gun was drawn from the holster. A small hand patted him under the armpits.

"Now turn around," she directed. "I want a good look at you, you bushwhackin' *borrachon.*"

The girl wasn't very big, Solo discovered, but the muzzle of the saddle gun she had trained on him looked like a cannon. She was wearing blue jeans and a wash-faded blue shirt. It was too dark to tell, but he thought her hair looked brown under the shadow of her old hat. Her slitted eyes blazed fury at him.

"I didn't kill this gent, ma'am," he told her, getting a grip on his shaky nerves. "I was just ridin' along and—"

"I suppose you didn't murder old Dad

Brody when you busted out of jail last night?" she flung at him, hotly. "Nor hold up the Hondo stage and kill the shotgun guard? Why, I even catch you going through a dead man's pockets and then you've got the gall to claim you didn't kill him! I ought to shoot you down and save the law the expense!"

A woman with a gun, Solo figured, was dangerous as a sidewinder with a broken back. And this one was as full of fight as a cornered wildcat. He raised his hands a little higher.

"No, ma'am," he answered, mildly. "I didn't do none of them things. I found this fellow, dead, and was just hunting through his pockets for the makings. A man needs a smoke when he finds something like this."

"I suppose that's a *mescal* weed in your mouth," she said, contemptuously. "You'd better think up another story."

Solo took the cigarette out of his mouth and stared at it foolishly. He put it in his shirt pocket and grinned. "You sure are a purty trick," he told her, "but you're making it mighty hard for us to get acquainted."

"You can cut out the flattery," she snapped. "It won't save you from a hang-noose!"

SHE was slim and straight in the moonlight, and her shoulders rose and fell defiantly under the thin fabric of her shirt. She was easy on the eyes, all right, and Solo wished he was more of a hand with the ladies. He was beginning to feel like a man that's just stepped off into a bog hole.

"You've got the wrong slant on things, ma'am," he tried to explain. "I didn't even know this man."

"He was probably in Sheriff Colter's posse," said the girl, "out to trail you down. It's a shame they can't hang Link Webber with you."

"What has Webber got to do with it?"

"Why, everybody knows you were working for Link Webber when you killed old Fos Garrity and got sent to jail," she returned, chill-eyed. "One of these days the law will rake in Webber, too. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't help you break out of jail and hold up the stage."

"Lady," said Solo, in exasperation, "just who is this *ladron* you took me for?"

"You should have known folks would recognize you, you long-geared galoot," she informed him, hotly, "with that fancy garb you're wearing and your initials stitched in your vest and boots. Name of a mule, I reckon you'll say your name is Smith now!"

The way it looked to Solo, this angry-eyed girl had him fenced in. He wasn't a hand to argue with women-folks, and he knew it.

"Just you lead the way, honey," he said cheerfully, "and we'll find the sheriff or somebody that knows this Border-jumper and get things straightened out."

"No," said the girl, grimly, "*you'll* lead the way. And I'll be right behind you with Aunt Minnie—" she patted the Winchester stock "—to see that you don't make trouble."

The moon was about two hours high when they rode up to a little one-horse spread back in the hills from the Rio Bonita. There was a two-room 'dobe shack with a brush roof that needed patching, and an ivy-clad porch where a man could roundside comfortably when range work wasn't pressing. Beyond the house was a ramshackle frame barn and an out-scatter of pole corrals.

A short, bowlegged old puncher with sweeping gray cow-horn mustaches came out to meet them. A cartridge belt sagged about his lean flanks and he carried a saddle gun in one gnarled hand. He fired a question at the girl.

"Did you locate them missin' cattle, Sue?"

"No," said the girl, shortly. "But I got that jail-bird Tom Colter has been chasin' all over the country!" There was grim satisfaction in her tones.

The old puncher jumped as if he'd just stepped near a sidewinder. His gaze raked Solo from head to foot, and he peered at the initials stitched in his vest and boots. His faded old eyes almost popped out of his head.

"It's him, all right," he exclaimed, excitedly. "I'd know the gun-slingin' son anywhere! How'd you manage to get the drop on him, Sue?"

Solo had never seen the little cowhand with the saddle-warped legs before in his life, and he was certain the oldster had never seen him. This business was getting more cock-eyed by the minute. It worried a man.

"You're making a mistake, friend," he began, quietly. "I'm not—"

"You'll find out whose mistake it is," the old-timer snarled, "when you're swingin' on a limb!"

"Don't go getting your dander up, Gabby," the girl warned. "Scout around and see if you can find any of Colter's men. We want to get this owlhoot off our hands. It'd be bad if Link Webber jumped us while we were holding him prisoner."

"Tonight's the deadline," said Gabby, worriedly. "If we ain't out by morning, Webber aims to burn us out. I tell you, Sue, it ain't right for a girl to—"

"Go on about your business, Gabby," answered the girl, and herded Solo before her into the house.

Her hair was brown, all right, in the dim light of a tallow-drip candle set on a window ledge. She had a red mouth that Solo figured was ripe for kissing, and the cowboy garb she was wearing didn't hide the fact that she was all woman.

SOLO reckoned he'd never seen a prettier girl in his life. The feeling he had in his stomach now was like when she first pointed the rifle at him, only he was enjoying it. He made up his mind to come a-courtin' just as soon as this trouble was over. But first he had to convince her that he wasn't an outlaw.

"Just who is this Link Webber?" he asked, to start the ball rolling.

"You know more about Hashknife than I do," she said, coldly. "One of your bushwhackin' *amigos* over there dry-gulched my father about a month ago. Another shot young Cass Jones, who was riding for us at the time. He lived long enough to identify the man who killed him. It was Al Swett."

Her angry eyes told him the name should mean something. But it didn't. He reckoned a man could hand-pick every cow outfit in the country and not find a puncher more tangled up in his own rope than Solo Smith.

While he thought over what she had told him, he fished the crumpled brown-paper cigarette out of his pocket. He fumbled for a match. Not finding one, he glanced at the candle on the window sill.

The girl caught that glance, and the hammer on her rifle was thumbed back with an ominous click.

"Don't try any tricks," she warned. "I'd hate for Sheriff Colter to find a corpse here instead of a real live outlaw."

Solo put the cigarette away. "Why don't you tell me all about it?" he suggested.

Her eyes were cold and hard as she looked at him, but he could see worry lurking in their brown depths. Her manner reminded him of a pup that's been cuffed and kicked around until it hasn't a friend left in the world. But he could tell by her eyes, and by the strain around her mouth, that she was near the breaking point. He felt sorry for her.

"It won't hurt anything," he said with a smile. "And I like to listen to your voice."

Solo was a slim, dark-haired rider with a friendly manner. It may have been the smile that won her over. Probably it was just her desperate need to talk to somebody besides old Gabby, who was the type to do most of the talking himself on nearly any subject brought up.

She spoke haltingly at first, as if there was too much bitterness inside her that wanted to come out. Then the words poured out in a torrent of passion.

From the best Solo could gather, there was a skunk named Link Webber in this Rio Bonita country who liked to smell up a lot of land. His Hashknife spread was close to the Border and had an ugly, blood-spattered reputation. He had taken over most of the little outfits in the country, either hiring the owners killed or forcing them to sell for a fraction of what their land and cattle was worth.

It was one of Webber's men, according to the girl, who had dry-gulched her father. He wanted the Benton Bob Link spread and he didn't care how he got it.

Solo reckoned Link Webber was a low, crawling thing to fight a girl over a little one-horse outfit and a few head of scrub Mexican cattle. Just hearing about it made his blood boil.

"You're sure Webber is the man behind this?" he said, in dry, heated tones.

"Al Swett killed our other rider," she answered, almost in tears, "and he's Webber's ramrod. I'm certain it was a Hashknife hand who shot Dad. We found his trail the next morning, and followed it right to the Hashknife fence. Most of our cattle have been rustled

across the river, and Webber is bound to have a hand in that."

"Why doesn't the sheriff stop Webber?"

"Tom Colter is a good enough lawman, I guess," she returned, with a helpless gesture. "But he hasn't got spunk enough to stand up against Webber or Al Swett. They're both killers of the worst kind."

Her eyes narrowed as she looked back at him. "But we aren't as bad off as you think," she added, grimly, as if angry because she had showed him a momentary weakness. "There's a thousand dollar bounty on your head, and the stage company is offering over a thousand for recovery of the loot. That will give us the money to restock Bob Link.

"And when they get you on that gallows, with a hang-noose around your neck, I'm betting you'll spill enough on Link Webber to get him hung too!"

Solo wished there was a reward out for his capture. He'd been a drifter all of his life, riding new trails and admiring his shadow along the way. But meeting Sue Benton had changed all of that, somehow. He knew a sudden, poignant regret for all of the things he'd missed in his carefree, happy-go-lucky life. The past seemed suddenly empty and he knew he would never ride over another hill if Sue Benton would let him hang around. . . .

IT WAS nearing midnight when they heard the sound of hoofs on the river road. A few minutes later, old Gabby burst into the house, out of wind and waving his arms in excitement.

"It's—it's them!" he managed, fairly dancing around the room. "They're swinging up past the corrals right now!"

"You mean the sheriff?" the girl's face was suddenly drained of color.

"Shucks, no!" Gabby ripped out. "It's Link Webber and a hull pack of his toughs!"

The girl's shoulders slumped. She made an odd gesture with her hand, as if trying to push away the trouble that was hemming her in. Her lips held the shape of bitter defeat when she turned to Solo.

"There's your gun on the table," she said, in lifeless tones. "Take it and get out."

"You're lettin' me go, then?" said Solo.

"Of course," she answered, in the same thoroughly depressed voice. "We can't fight the whole Hashknife outfit to hold you."

Solo picked up the gun.

"Don't you worry about a thing, ma'am," he said. "I'll get rid of these coyotes for you." With an air of bravado that he was far from feeling, he stepped out on the porch.

The riders sweeping into the yard didn't know it, but they were up against a man as desperate as a trapped brush-boar. Not that it made a lot of difference, Solo admitted to himself. The puncher figured that he could ride just about anything with four legs and hair. He could rope and pop brush with the best of them, and he knew what the cow said to her calf.

But when it came to handling a six-gun, Solo Smith made a good sheep-herder. Still, a man could try. Especially when the girl of his dreams was inside the house watching him.

Hoofs rattled in the yard, and Solo saw that old Gabby had exaggerated things. There were just two riders. Both men let their horses travel on to the porch. One man, square and heavy in the saddle, threw a rough challenge at the puncher.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded, harshly.

Solo guessed this was Link Webber, and was surprised that his knees weren't trembling in the presence of a man who scared women and little children half to death.

The other rider wore a canvas brush jacket and scuffed boots, and two service-worn six-shooters that fitted into his visible personality as much as the black Stetson on his head. He was as long as a jackknife and looked about as wicked. Solo knew this would be Al Swett, Webber's ramrod.

"I do odd chores around the place," the puncher drawled. "What's on your mind, gents?"

Webber looked down at him as if he were something underfoot in the corral. "If you value your hide," he said flatly, "you'll quit the country before mornin'. I'm taking this outfit over."

"Maybe," said Solo. "But you got a powerful big job on your hands. That

ain't what you come here about, though."

Webber and Swett exchanged quick glances. "What makes you say that?" Webber countered.

"You're lookin' for a man," Solo told him.

"That's right," Webber admitted. He thought it over for a long time before he added the name: "Sam Swett."

"Is he a tall, tough-looking jigger with a couple of long scars down his face?"

Webber nodded. The foreman leaned forward in the saddle to ask, curtly: "Have you seen him?"

It occurred to Solo then that Al Swett and the outlaw were kin of some kind, something neither Sue nor Gabby told him, and a little chill of warning crept up his spine. Sweat cracked through his skin. This was dangerous business, and he knew it. But he maintained his indifferent pose on the porch, and his voice was conversational when he spoke.

"Sure," he said. "I left him up in the hills—dead." It was a risky bluff, and he hoped he wasn't stuck with it.

"You mean you killed Sam Swett?" The Hashknife foreman jerked in the saddle as if he'd been jabbed with a razor-sharp *punal*. His thin, virulent face was seized with a killing fury, and his hand crept close to a gun.

"You a lawman?" Webber flung at him, stridently. "Are you a Texas Ranger?" Solo's coolness had unsettled the man, punctured his iron composure.

SOLO was watching Al Swett like a hawk, figuring the danger lay there. He wasn't taking any chances. He still had the gun in his right hand, hidden behind the fringe of his chaps.

At that, Al Swett almost beat him to the first shot. Solo leveled down at the long man's stomach—and hit his gun hand. The Hashknife ramrod dropped his gun and gripped his bullet-smashed fingers. His high-pitched cursing filled the yard.

"Ride on out," Solo ordered, waving the smoking gun at Webber. "Shut your filthy mouth or I'll shoot your heart out piece by piece. There's a lady present."

It helped Solo's feelings considerably for the girl to see him run a sandy like this on Hashknife. But Webber still had a gun and the puncher doubted that he could do the big man much damage with just four shots left.

"Are you a Ranger?" Webber threw at him again. Then he caught up the reins of Swett's mount and led it off into the night.

"We'll be back," he promised.

Solo meant to put a shot between the horses, to spook them on. His bullet snatched the rancher's hat from his head. It was good shooting—so Webber thought.

"Great jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" old Gabby gulped, behind him. "Son, you shore are hell on a forty-four frame when it comes to handling a shootin'-iron!"

Both Gabby and the girl were staring at him. There was awe in the old cowhand's eyes, and something in Sue Benton's glance that warmed Solo's blood like the bite of good whisky. It made the long chance he'd run seem well worth it, just to have her look at him like he'd hung the moon.

"I reckon them fellers won't give you any more trouble right soon, ma'am," he said, and tried to flip his gun back in the holster the way he'd seen a fast marshal do. But the gun hung, and he had to jiggle it in.

"Just who are you, stranger?" Sue Benton asked. Then she faltered, "I—I don't know what to say about—mistaking you—for—"

"It was a natural mistake," Solo grinned. He added, tongue in cheek, "I reckon all of us gun-slicks look a little hard, and that makes it difficult to tell the honest ones from outlaws."

"Hell on a forty-four frame," old Gabby said again, admiringly. "It was a sight for sore eyes to see somebody make that prideful Hashknife bunch eat corral-dirt and like it!"

Solo looked down at his hands and tried to imagine himself snatching out a six-shooter and putting six slugs through an ace of spades at an unlikely distance—ten feet. He couldn't, and his hands shook a little when he realized how lucky he'd been out there in the yard. He shoved them in his pockets.

"Hell on a forty-four frame."

But Sue was bustling about the kitchen as if a big load had been taken from her shoulders, preparing Solo a late supper, and old Gabby was as full of hero-worship as a shirt-tail kid. It did the puncher's heart good to see how Sue's spirits had brightened. She had about lost hope, but his run-in with

Webber and Al Swett had her thinking the Almighty had finally sent a real fighting man her way.

The puncher couldn't stand the thought of disillusioning her. And the first thing anybody knew, he was letting on that Bat Masterson was one of his best friends and that he'd helped Wyatt Earp buffalo the Thompson brothers that time in Ellsworth. It surprised Solo as much as either of them. But he went on to make a good story out of it, really laying the brag on thick, because it seemed the more he talked the warmer that light in Sue's eyes became.

"You'd shore better be able to back up that bluff you throwed into Hashknife," old Gabby declared, after staying out of the conversation as long as he could. "Them salty gents don't take kindly to shovin' around."

"Solo will take care of things," Sue answered, with a confident smile, and ordered Gabby to make a circle around the place and see that everything was in order.

Solo wasn't so sure of that, but it sounded mighty good to hear her say it. And it was too late now to show his hole card. Following Gabby into the yard, he asked the old puncher to take Sue and hole-up somewhere out in the brush, away from the house.

"I'll hang around in case Hashknife shows up again," he said.

BUT all of his assurance vanished when the pair had left and he was alone in the barn. There was an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Now that he had time to consider it, jumping Webber and his boot-tough ramrod was like tackling a den of wildcats bare-handed. To keep from worrying over that unpleasant angle, he thought back over what Sue had told him.

Sam Swett had been in jail, awaiting trial on the charge of murdering a little rancher on the lower Bonita. He had escaped, after killing the night deputy, and had held up the Hondo stage and brutally shot down the shotgun guard. He had made off with nearly twenty thousand dollars in gold from the robbery.

There was a reward of a thousand dollars outstanding for Mr. Swett's capture, and the stage company was offering twelve hundred for the recovery of the loot. The combined total was more than Solo Smith had earned in his life.

The way Solo had things figured, somebody had helped the outlaw break out of jail. The pair had been jumped by some of Tom Colter's posse. That would explain why the lawmen had left Swett's body where it fell, to give chase to his companion. Solo felt certain that either Webber or Al Swett had been with the outlaw at the time.

Another thought came to the puncher, harder than the rest, with alarming implications. He had let on to Webber and Al Swett that he had gunned down the outlaw, used that ready-made rep and a bit of lucky shooting to run a bluff on them. But the bluff wouldn't stick if the outlaw had been carrying the loot at the time he was killed, and Hashknife thought Solo now had it. That outfit wouldn't pass up twenty thousand dollars for a regiment of Texas Rangers, Solo told himself glumly.

He was in a cold sweat now, and mighty glad he'd ordered Sue and old Gabby away from the house. The girl would be safe, at least. But Solo was left on a hot spot. His chances of getting out with a whole hide were pretty slim.

Because he still had a big batch of thinking to go over, and to quiet his ragged nerves, the puncher fished the brown-paper quirly out of his pocket. Then he remembered that he had no matches, and stuck it moodily back in his shirt. He found the ladder to the loft and crawled up, making himself as comfortable as possible on a scattering of hay.

It was nearing daylight when Solo heard furtive sounds out in the night. A horse with an empty saddle shook itself, the stirrups rattling faintly. A twig cracked under a careless foot and a man cursed softly under his breath. There were other muted, sinister sounds out there in the darkness.

The puncher rolled out of the hay with his reloaded and cleaned six-shooter in his hand. He cat-footed to the door at the end of the loft and peered cautiously out. What he saw left him chill with the knowledge that he was now a candidate for a sod coffin. Vague shadows stirred down there. A man's harsh breathing sounded in the corral beside the barn, and Solo made out his tall, solid shape in the black

mouth of the saddle shed.

He drew back from the window and wiped clammy sweat from his brow. All illusions of grandeur were dispelled in that instant, and he was up against cold reality. Webber's gang meant business; a man could get himself killed quick in this kind of trap.

Solo thought of that and his breath came short and shallow; fear froze his innards. Then he thought of Sue, and the loud-mouthed braggin' he'd done to bolster the girl's waning spirits. How he'd let on that he was a gunfighter in a class with King Fisher and that fuzz-chinned kid out New Mexico way. He wished desperately that he'd kept his big mouth shut and ridden safely out of this mess.

But Solo wasn't laying his hand down just because Webber held all of the aces. He might be scared until his insides shriveled into coils of ice, until his finger froze on the hammer. But he wasn't letting Sue Benton down. He'd be a low, crawling thing if he ran out on the girl now.

So he waited while the shadows closed in around the barn, and he counted ten men in the gun-hung bunch. Moonlight glinted on ready carbines and there was a click of metal as somebody pronged a hammer back. A hard voice hailed the house. Silence. Then the night was chopped with muzzle flame and a veritable fusillade riddled the building.

THE steady racket merged into silence that was loud as an echo. Solo's flesh cringed when he thought of what might have happened if he hadn't sent Sue and Gabby away.

Link Webber's voice spoke, heavy with satisfaction: "They ain't nobody could live through that hornet's nest. Some of you boys look through the barn. I hope that Texas Ranger hasn't flown the coop."

"What makes you so certain he was a Ranger?" was Al Swett's dry query. "He was probably just a glory-huntin' puncher riding with the posse, and shot Sam in the back."

"He had too much confidence," replied Webber, "and he was too quick with a gun. He was plenty salty even for a Ranger."

Solo had very little confidence at the time. Fear probed at him with icy fingers as the barn door swung open and footsteps prowled the stables. His breathing sounded loud as a gun-shot in his own ears.

"Ain't nobody in here," a voice volunteered. "I'll have a look at the loft."

Solo looked wildly about him, hunting some avenue of escape. There wasn't enough hay to hide in, and the man down there had found a lantern and was coming up the ladder. He looked at the loft door, swinging wide on rusty hinges. He was tempted to jump and run for it, but he knew he'd get cut down before he reached the safety of the brush.

There was just one chance. He gripped the loft door with both hands, and shoved. It swung out and around, carrying him against the outer wall. He hung there, not daring to breath, directly above the group of men in the corral.

Light spilled through the door and steps sounded in the loft. Solo almost groaned out his relief when the ladder gave out its sharp protest under descending weight. The rough pine boards were cutting into his hands, making his position all the more untenable.

"Nobody up there, either," said the searcher.

Al Swett circled the corral on restless feet, his hard gaze stabbing at every corner.

"They ain't far," he said, in worried tones. "I don't like this, Link. I got the feeling we're being watched at this very minute."

"Calm down," retorted Webber. "I hope to blazes they ain't far. We got to find that Ranger and recover the map he took off Sam when he killed him. You were a blamed fool, Al, to bury that loot in the first place. Then to let a Ranger shoot Sam and get hold of the only map was plumb silly."

"Aw, choke it," snarled Swett. "I wasn't with Sam when he buried the loot. The law was crowding him close, and he had to get rid of that heavy stuff in order to outrun the posse. Then, after he'd met me, we ran smack into some of the posse. I was too busy worrying about saving my own hide to stop and grab the map after they'd knocked Sam out of the saddle. I'm no fool, Webber.

"And the map was gone, of course, when we finally got back to Sam's body. If this Ranger killed Sam, I reckon it's

a safe bet that he has it now."

"If I thought you *had* the map," Link Webber began, "and was holding out on me—"

He broke off, startled. Solo had been trying to kick the door shut and get back into the loft. His dragging weight was more than the rusty hinges could stand. One of them came loose with a rusty screech of nails and splintering wood, and he dangled helplessly above the corral.

Then the other hinge broke and he plummeted down!

To Solo Smith, this was like an awful nightmare in which he was falling into the clutches of the Devil himself. Only this time he arrived.

He managed to twist in mid-air and land on his feet. He was reaching for his gun when Link Webber broke free of the stunned inertia that had gripped him, and snapped a quick shot.

"It's that Ranger!" Webber yelled.

The slug smacked into the wall near Solo's head. He had his own gun out now, and flung a shot at Webber. He heard it hit a post somewhere across the corral. He shot again and saw splinters fly from a feed-trough fully a dozen feet from where Hashknife's owner stood.

A BULLET ripped into his side and gouged at his ribs, spinning him half around. Another smashed into his leg and dropped him in his tracks. Half a dozen more splintered into the wall where he had been standing. From that prone position, he shot again and cut the top wire of the corral gate in two.

But Webber was down now, a sodden heap beside the feed-trough, and the rest of the Hashknife gang were trying to get out of the corral that had turned into a death trap. Guns were blasting at them from out of the brush and the drone of flying lead cut through the thunderous racket like an overtone of death.

"Ride out of here!" Al Swett called wildly. "It's a trap!"

The ramrod suddenly whirled and grabbed a gate post, sliding down this to the ground. Another Hashknife gun-hand dropped as he ran for the horses, and staggered up again with his hands in the air. He fell a second time and lay still.

The rest of the well-whipped bunch threw away their guns and lifted their hands in token of surrender. The shooting stopped. Solo Smith figured there must be at least a dozen men in the posse that surrounded the place.

But it was old Gabby who came out of the shadows to take their guns and tie them up with lengths of catch-rope cut from their own saddles. Then Sue Benton came across the corral to where Solo Smith lay, and dragged him into a sitting position. The puncher gritted his teeth and grinned sheepishly up at her.

"We shore whipped the sox off them fellers, didn't we?" he said.

For answer, Sue pitched her hat about twenty feet away. She handed him a six-gun.

"Now," she said grimly, "I want to

THE RIO KID DARES A DOMAIN OF DEATH!

Follow the fighting exploits of the Rio Kid as he enters a perilous camp of terror and pits himself against the infamous renegades known as the Black Saints in—

THE YELLOWSTONE EMPIRE

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE!

see some of that fancy shooting you been bragging about. I want to see how you shot Bat Thompson's hat off at a hundred yards."

"I might ruin your hat."

"To blazes with the hat," said Sue. "I'll buy a new one."

Well, it had been a nice try, Solo told himself forlornly. A man couldn't be blamed too much for trying to make a girl like Sue Benton think him a gunfighter from who laid the chunk. Anything was fair in love and a range war. He drew back the hammer and sighted carefully along the barrel of the gun.

He missed the hat a good three feet. His next shot chipped bark from a post near where Gabby had the Hashknife hands herded. Gabby let out a howl of protest.

"Just what I thought," Sue commented. "You didn't hit a single thing you shot at tonight." Then she knelt and put her arms around his neck.

"Oh, you fool! You crazy, lovable fool!"

Solo wasn't at all certain he hadn't been killed and was waking up in Heaven in the care of an angel. He knew a sudden, choking joy that he seldom had occasion to feel.

"You—you mean you ain't mad at me, Sue?"

She shook her head, and her eyes were moist. "How could I be? Light up a quirly while I put a bandage on your leg and side to stop the bleeding. You'll be riding in no time, cowboy."

"I'm not riding anywhere," Solo objected, fishing the crumpled brown-paper cigarette out of his pocket. "I'm staying on as foreman—or something."

"It will have to be something," said Sue, lighting a match for him. "Gabby is foreman." Solo knew what that something would be, if he could locate a preacher, and he grinned happily as he drew on the cigarette.

Then he let out a yell of horror. In spite of his wounds, he threw the cigarette on the ground and hastily smothered the fire.

"Have you gone mad, Solo?" She gasped.

"Mad!" he exclaimed, in awed tones. "I was just about to smoke up twenty thousand dollars!" He carefully unrolled the brown paper. Sure enough, a crude map had been drawn on it.

"Why that's Rincon Mesa!" Sue cried. "Here is Wolf Springs. Swett buried the loot right there in the forks below the springs."

"He sure did," Solo grinned, sinking back in a weak heap against the barn. Then he thought of the twelve hundred dollar reward that he'd almost smoked up—and fainted.

The Balance

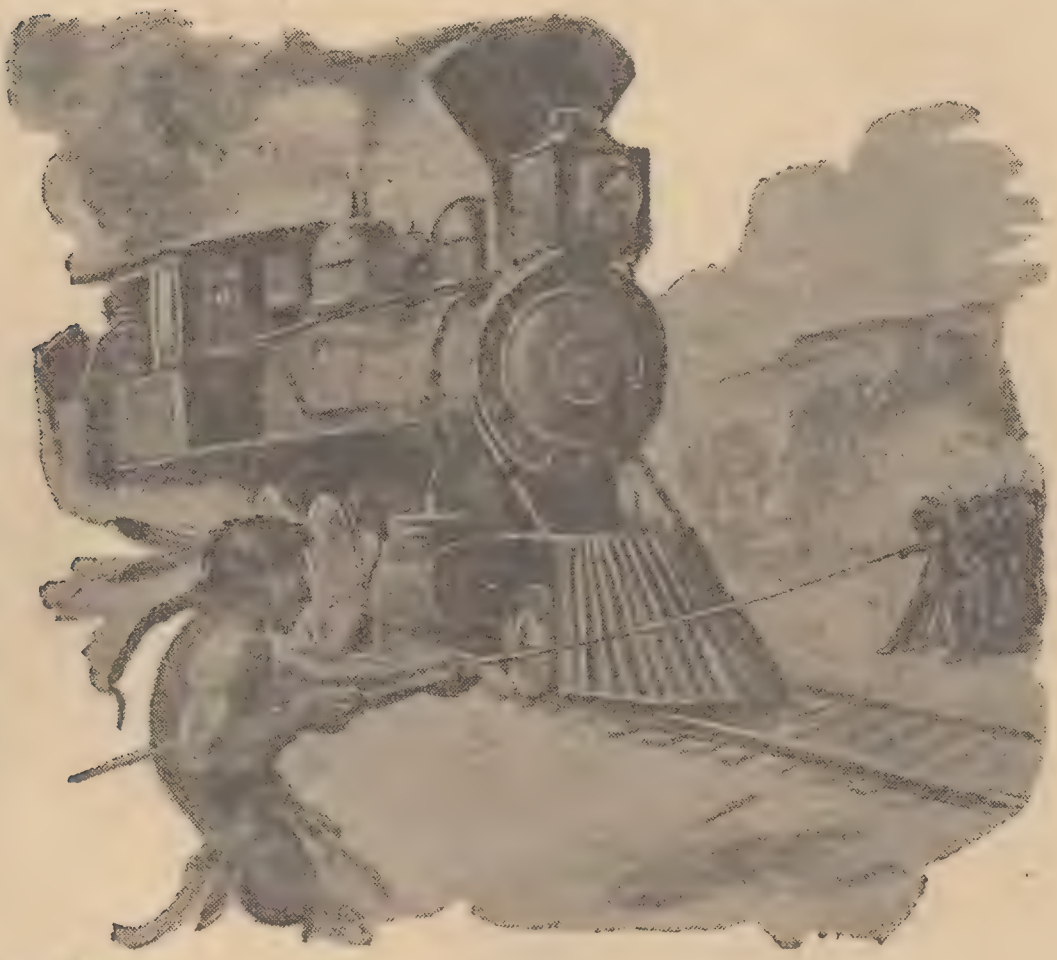
MAN seldom has trouble with Nature until he upsets her balance. In the case of the West, the big upsetting factor was the railroad. As important to civilization as the railroad has been, it has brought about changes not always welcomed by the very people who wanted it.

For example, wolves never bothered cattle or horses until the buffalo were slaughtered. Buffalo were the natural prey of wolves, who followed the herds and to some extent kept their numbers in balance. The herds were slaughtered to feed the men who built the railroads, to clear the range for trains and for the coming cattle. Wolves had no choice but to turn to calves and colts of the man-brought herds for their foods.

The same railroad which ended the wilderness, eventually ended the open range by bringing farmers west and making it possible for them to ship their produce to Eastern markets. And the next step may yet see the end of the big farms as we know them today. —*Rex Sherrick*

A vivid true story of the era of railroad construction, when the pioneers of progress proved their mettle!

by HARRY VAN DEMARK



the YANKEE Go-Getters

YANKEES of the real old dyed-in-the-wool New England variety played a dominant part in the winning of the American West. From the days of the forty-niners down to the time when railroads were building from east to west, and west to east, they left an indelible imprint on the western scene.

It was during this period of railroad construction that the Yanks proved themselves the "go-getters" of their day. They even set a couple of records that stood up for a long time. They were the first step onto railroad cars on the Atlantic seaboard and stay on those same cars until they arrived at San Francisco and the Golden Gate.

They were the first real transcontinental railroad passengers. Their special pulled out of Boston over the Boston & Albany Railroad on a Monday morning. On the way out only necessary stops were made—none for drumming up business, except a few hours in Chicago. Those merchants were going a long way in search of new business and they were in a hurry. Early Sunday morning their train arrived at San Francisco.

Six days from coast to coast by rail! It was a record that the wise ones declared probably never would be beaten. That's the way they felt about it then. That Boston outfit made the front page in every paper in the country, and the Californians, many of whom were transplanted Yankees, put on a celebration that left the Easterners limp. But the way people on the coast showered them with orders for New England goods revived them in a hurry.

Pullman Builds Sleeping-Cars

It was a hard, tough trip in those days, but it was a voyage worth taking. Five years before a man named George Pullman had built a rolling contraption that he called the Pullman Palace Sleeping Car, but which the public quickly dubbed, "Pullman's Folly," so sure were they that the pioneer would go broke.

The Chicago & Alton, which was the next year to pioneer in the nation's first dining-car, then called a "hotel" car, was finally persuaded to try Pullman's Palace car on a night run. Monied travelers took it first out of curiosity and then because of the comfort they found. Soon others were built.

Five of them, together with one of the new dining-cars and a couple of baggage cars, made up the New England special, crammed full of business men, still willing to risk hold-ups and Indian raids for the sake of profits. And, hardship or no hardship, they went across the continent like kings.

When George Pullman called those sleepers of his "palace" cars, he wasn't fooling. The floors were covered with thick, deep-red carpets. Ornate tapestries lent color to the interiors. Every inch of exposed wood was elaborately carved.

The large windows were of flawless plate glass. No wonder the Boston outfit felt like millionaires—which, as a matter of fact, some of them were.

Many Luxuries Aboard

Their train boasted a barber-shop, a bathroom to each car, a music room and two libraries. Food fit for a gourmet was stored in their larders, served in thin china on mahogany tables.

Besides the delicacies they carried along, they lived off the country as they progressed—wild ducks, venison, prairie chickens, antelope steak, buffalo hump chops and mountain trout made every meal a banquet.

The wine list—there was a full baggage car of choice wines and liquors—didn't hurt any, either.

Yes, in many respects it was a rough trip, but they were tallying another "first." One inspired head of a publishing firm brought along a few fonts of type and a little hand-press. With this outfit they turned out the first daily paper ever published aboard a train anywhere.

Old newspaper files have revealed one excerpt from this pioneer sheet. The train was descending the Great Divide just at sunset, when the little sheet of water known as Donner Lake burst on the delighted gaze of the travelers.

"It nestles," the chronicler wrote, "at the base of the mountain, and we gazed with pleasure on its clear, crystal surface, tinted with cerulean blue, reflected from the cloudless vault of Heaven."

Trip Is a Success

It was the same Donner Lake which a decade or two before had figured in some of the most distressing incidents in Western history.

This merchandising trip, which blazed the commercial trail from east to west was so successful that it was followed by similar trains from other eastern cities. Contemporary accounts agree, however, that the others found pretty lean pickings after the Boston merchants got through making their connections.

It was fitting and proper that New England Yankees should have been among the first to write merchandising history with the help of the newly-constructed Union Pacific. For if it hadn't been for Yankee brains and Yankee

cash, the joining of that road with the Central Pacific would have been a lot further east than Promontory Point, Utah, and probably at a much later date.

Perham Promotes Railroad

Records show that while there had been talk of a transcontinental line for years, a Boston merchant, Josiah Perham, was the first man of money to do anything about it. Perham's idea was to build the road without the aid of Government funds.

"I'm going to sell subscriptions of one hundred dollars each to one million Americans and build the road with the proceeds," he declared.

Perham spent a lot of his time and money organizing the People's Pacific Railroad Company, which was incorporated on March 10, 1860. Offices were opened and the public invited to bring or send in their $100 subscriptions. They didn't come.

Perham, the patriotic American, who was looking for nothing for himself, put so much time and money into trying to put the idea over, that his business failed and he went broke.

Nevertheless, even with Josiah Perham out of the picture, New England was destined to play a major part in the laying of the rails of the Union Pacific. If death had not intervened Yankees might have built the western end of the line, too.

A young engineer, Theodore D. Judah, who had located the pass over the mountains that made the Central Pacific possible, became one of the leaders in the start of that railroad. He was disgusted, though, by his partners' machinations that later developed into a scandal, and set out for the East.

Yellow Fever

Judah said he knew honest New Englanders who would put up the money and take over. But Judah contracted yellow fever crossing the isthmus of Panama and died before his ship reached Boston.

Still New Englanders wrote their names large in the spanning of the continent. The Union Pacific just couldn't seem to get started laying rails out of Omaha until Colonel Grenville M. Dodge was made chief engineer. Dodge, who carried the job through, was of sturdy New Hampshire stock, though his family had moved West while he was a child. Dodge came out of the Union Army to build the Union Pacific.

Even Dodge's wizardry of construction would have been of little avail had it not been for two Boston brothers, who took over the management of the whole enterprise when it was on the brink of disaster, principally through self-seeking manipulations on the part of the bankers.

Ames Aids Project

The government at Washington was alarmed at the state of affairs, looked about for an honest leader, found him in Oakes Ames, one of Massachusetts' representatives in Congress, and a wealthy manufacturer of shovels. Oliver Ames followed his brother into the venture, invested his wealth, became a director and finally president of the Union Pacific during the days it was under construction.

Then a lot of other New Englanders by adoption swarmed into the picture, made the West wilder than it had been, but wrote many a railroad construction record into the history of the Union Pacific.

This linking of the oceans with steel became a great contest, its daily progress followed breathlessly by the public, with the Central Pacific building east and the Union Pacific building west, both anxious to obtain the huge subsidies in land and cash offered by the Government. The more miles either road built, the greater its take from the public treasury. And, as is well known, the Central Pacific had a big start on the U. P.

Irish Join Venture

"So those fellows out on the coast are building their road with Chinese," observed Oliver Ames when he stepped into the presidency of the Union Pacific. "Don't try to tell me that twenty Chinese can lay rails against one Irishman!"

Out from New England, in fact, all the East, came trainloads of Irish workers, many of them fresh from the homeland, to build a roadbed, and lay rails at a pace that ran the Central Pacific ragged. And when the rails eventually met at Promontory Point, the dauntless Irish had the Union Pacific head of steel

250 miles further west than anyone had thought possible.

In his memoirs Oliver Ames left the record of one exciting experience. The Sioux, warriors of the plains, were becoming alarmed at what the building of the railroad was likely to do to their hunting grounds. They visioned the white hordes coming, over-running their land, forcing them back and back. Which, of course, is what happened.

Sioux Form Plan

The Sioux chiefs held a big pow-wow, decided that something had to be done to rid the prairies of the snorting monster that carried white men hither and yon at such a tremendous pace. So three chiefs massed their braves and led them out to capture the iron steed. The utter simplicity of their plan commended it to the entire tribe. They knew it couldn't fail.

The day they tried it happened to be one Oliver Ames has selected for an inspection trip. He mounted to the cab of an engine pulling fifteen cars of construction material and away they went, little reckoning on the show the Sioux were to put on for them at a spot where a dip in the terrain and a copse of willows screened the view. A perfect place for an ambush.

For days the women of the Sioux tribe had been busy, fashioning a strong, extra-long lariat of the best hair. When it was done knots for handholds were tied along each end. Sixty of the strongest young braves were selected to capture the iron horse. That done, the rest of the tribe would lift the scalps of the white riders and then ride off on their steeds in victory.

Indians Lasso Engine

Down the line came the construction train, the engineer, fireman and Oliver Ames in the cab. Hurtling along, they topped the rise and swooped down into the ambush. A glance showed what was set up for them. The redmen had their special lariat across the track. Thirty sturdy braves on each side, their feet dug into the ground, stretched it taut at just the right height to meet the boiler-head of the engine.

The ruse was apparent, but it was too late to stop. Those strong Indians were going to catch the locomotive with their rope, expecting to bring it to a stop by sheer weight and brawn.

When Engineer Tim Bryan saw the set-up he nearly tumbled from his seat with joy at the spectacle he was about to behold. He pulled the whistle cord, rent the prairie stillness with a long shriek, then opened the throttle a notch or two further. When the engine hit the rope it was going at a good fifty miles an hour.

Head Over Heels

Those must have been the most astonished Indians in the world. When the engine breasted the barrier it didn't even hesitate. Neither did the sixty braves, thirty on each end of the rope. They left terra firma as though shot out of cannons, described graceful parabolas through the ambient atmosphere and were festooned alongside the cars before they could let go. Some of them were killed. Many were injured.

The only danger to the wild tracklayers riding the cars was that they would roll off in the ecstasy that engulfed them when they saw the air full of redskins. That was the first and last attempt of the Sioux to rope a locomotive.

It is too bad that history doesn't record the statements of the Sioux chiefs as their battered warriors picked themselves up off the right-of-way and carried off their unfortunate comrades.

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Tolman's Colt spewed fire and thunder at the two men

Blood Talks for Tolman

By FRANCIS H. AMES

A young rancher gambles with death against gunfighting rustler foes!

DAVE Tolman was a nester—a tall, lanky, dark haired individual whose greenish-gray eyes had developed crows feet running out from the corners from looking into too many suns—eyes too old for his twenty-five odd years. He was one of those men that are so common in the West, who ride for various outfits a few months at a time and then pull their picket pins and drift away without looking over their shoulder. Some such men come and go until they're known casually from the Powder to the Pecos, and who often wind up telling circular tales to pilgrims around some outfit in their old age.

Others, like Dave Tolman, get tired with the life—perhaps confused—and spotting a piece of prairie that looks good to them, they set down to think things over, squatting on the land and throwing up a shack, pole corral and sod barn. Often, after a few months, they move on, leaving the place for the range bulls to horn down when their blood runs hot in the spring.

Others stick around until the Government gets around to surveying the land. Then they cinch their squatters rights with a filing fee and sell out to a big outfit. In a few cases they marry and plant themselves to grow. When they do this, another spread is born, and a new brand shows in the loading chutes.

Tolman was following the usual routine, but with one exception. Acquiring an unexpected windfall in a poker game in Cottonwood, he'd been able to buy twenty two-year-old heifers and a bull from the Clayton L Swinging D outfit. These were not the usual run of stuff most nesters started out with—Sonora reds, mixtures of Texas Longhorns, Red Polls, and what have you. These were plump Herefords, with white faces and stockings, their backs and sides red with the color of liver, laying glossy and slightly waved, a pretty picture to any cattleman's eye.

Dave was normally an easy going jasper but his hackles rose and he went on the prod pronto when some gent ran his choice stuff off before he had even got well settled in his new layout. The sign was fresh and no attempt had been made to conceal it. Tolman followed at the gallop, his face flushed with anger.

"Some owl-hoot," he muttered to himself, "is goin' to get his horns sawed off right down to the skull."

The rustler, and it was a single man, had drifted the stock straight into the brakes, and it was a good two-hour ride before Tolman cautiously peered over a butte top and saw the set of ranch buildings sprawled out below him in a flat bottomed canyon. Looking down from his height, the cowboy could see every detail of the spread. His heifers and bull, their rich coats gleaming in the brassy sun, paced restlessly in the corral.

THE situation called for caution; a Winchester barrel might well be poked from behind a cracked door, ready to cut him down when he appeared. It was characteristic of the man that he rode boldly up on the skyline and down to the house. The yard drowsed in the heat as he urged his horse forward; a few bedraggled chickens pecked listlessly about, while a cur dog under the porch looked at the intruder questioningly, and without barking.

Tolman swung down, placed his back against his bronc's shoulder while he hitched up his Levis with one hand and loosened his six-gun in the holster with the other. His eyes narrowed and roved slowly about the place. Then he walked boldly, but silently up on the porch, filled his hand, and kicked the door open so strongly that it swung back against the inside wall with a bang. He stepped quickly through, sliding sideways to place his back to the wall. He stood there with six-gun held hip high, glaring at the two persons sitting at the table in the center of the room.

"What goes on here?" he asked softly.

The girl and man at the table half rose from their chairs and then, noting the cocked Colt, slowly sat down again. The man was well along in years, gray headed, blue eyed, and mild looking. The girl, of about twenty years old, was like a brown thrush. Tanned, brown haired, and with eyes brown as autumn leaves—eyes that were now large with fear, but with a pleading look which searched Tolman's face as though to bare his very soul for reading.

"Sit down, sit down," said the man heartily, "You ain't seen thirty prime heifers around have you?"

"No," snapped Tolman, "but I seen twenty blooded heifers in yore corral. I'm drivin' them back to my spread and takin' you into Big Powder to the sheriff, mister."

"Please," said the girl, more with her eyes than with her lips, "Dad thought they were his."

"Thought they were his," echoed Tolman in unbelief. "With Clayton's vented brand on them?"

"Please," the girl said again, "you don't understand. If you've been in Big Powder, you must know of my father."

"If this is yore father, ma'am," snapped Tolman, "he just got in from rustlin' my stock. What kind of a deal is this anyway? Drive a man's beefs off in broad daylight, slap 'em in yore corral, and then ask the man to set down and eat with you."

The old man looked at Tolman with clear eyes in which there was no hint of guilt.

"Set down and fill yore face, mister," he said calmly. "Me and Connie ain't rustlers. Them's my heifers—I been lookin' for 'em for a couple of months."

"Looking for them a couple months," echoed Tolman. "Who do you think yuh're foolin' with? I ain't had them here over three weeks."

The girl caught Dave's eye now, something in her eyes made him take note, and believe the significance of the finger she tapped against her head, the age-

old sign to indicate the mentally deranged.

"Won't you have a bite to eat with us, Mr.—" the girl began.

"Tolman—Dave Tolman," said the cowboy. "Thanks."

The girl gave him a meaning look as she said, "Perhaps you'd like to wash up. The basin is on the back porch." Taking it for granted that he would follow, she led the way.

As they stepped out on the porch the girl turned quickly to shut the door, and placed her back against it.

"Now tell me," asked Dave, "what all this means?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tolman," she said, "but Dad had fifty head just like yours six years ago. He was slugged by rustlers and they were taken away from him. When he came to, he didn't remember anything that had happened. He thought the stock had drifted off. He's been looking for them ever since."

"Looking ever since?" echoed Tolman. "Do you mean to tell me the old fellow has been looking for two-year-old heifers for six years?"

The girl nodded, tears coming to her eyes.

"You've got to believe me. Everyone thinks he's crazy, but he's not, really. He's good, and kind, and normal about everything else but those heifers."

SOME of the life left the girl's face then and she seemed to sag, a suspicion of tears forming in her eyes. Thinking back, Dave remembered that he had heard of "Looney" Loomis—a word here and there that he had discounted as a range yarn, too strong to be believed.

The way the story went, Loomis had owned fifty head of prime Herefords and had had them taken from him after a battle with the owlhoots in which he'd had his hair parted with a gun barrel. Since that time he had ridden almost day and night looking for the stock, always expecting to find them and never realizing that the years were passing. He still looked for two-year-olds such as were seldom seen on this range.

Unable to bear the hurt look in the girl's eyes, the young man turned to quickly wash up. As he hung up the towel he remarked casually,

"Now I'll be right proud, ma'am, to shove my feet under yore table."

The girl didn't speak but a look of gratitude and relief came to her face. She led the way back into the front room. As Dave took a seat the oldster spoke pleasantly to him.

"It's shore queer about them heifers, mister," he declared. "Been huntin' high and low for 'em, and today there was twenty of the critters and my bull. Now where in time the rest of them got to, I can't figger, but I bet I find 'em come mornin'."

"How long they been strayed?" asked Dave, helping himself to some steak.

"How long has it been since I missed 'em, Connie?" the old man asked, turning to his daughter. "T'wan't more'n eight-ten weeks, don't seem like."

"Yes, Dad," the girl replied soberly. "That was about when they disappeared."

"That's a shame," declared Dave. "Those are shore fine lookin' critters. How did you manage to buy up stuff like that, Loomis?"

"Well," said the oldster rising from the table, "I sold off some middlin' stuff last fall in Chicago and figgered I'd start off with some pure blood. Thought it'ud pay in the long run, so I shipped 'em in from the East."

Standing there with his kindly face turned to where he could see the Herefords out the window, he went on, "'Twill pay off, too. Nothin' kin beat first class blooded stock on a ranch. Now I've found part of 'em it won't take me long to round up the rest."

With these words the old fellow strode from the room with an eager step and headed out to the corral. As he left the man and woman looked across the table at each other.

"What am I going to do?" the girl asked hopelessly. "He's been that way for over six years. He rides almost day and night, combing the country for miles, summer and winter—looking, looking, looking. Before this happened we had a nice ranch started—now look at it. Everyone says he's crazy; sometimes I think they think I am, too."

As tears showed again in the girl's eyes, Dave Tolman reached a big hand across the table and laid it on hers.

"How can I help, Connie?" he asked softly. "You're shore backed up in a corner, ma'am."

"Oh, you can't help," the girl cried, wringing her hands. "No one can help—unless—unless you leave the stock here. Dad would take the best care of it; it might make him forget the others. Maybe he could find some peace again."

"What would he do if he had the whole fifty head?"

"Why," replied the girl, "I think he'd stop searching and go to running the ranch again like any normal man. Of course, he'd still think that they had just strayed away a few weeks ago. He'd never remember the rustlers and the fight, but he'd be at peace again, and happy."

"Have you tried to get other stock to take their place?"

"Oh, no!" the girl exclaimed. "I've thought of it, but it took every cent we had to buy them six years ago. Since then it's been all we could do to live. There isn't any cattle like those in the country. Even though we had the money, we'd have to go East for them."

"Didn't you ever get any trace of the gents that did the dirty work? They couldn't just disappear. Blood lines like those aren't easily hid in this country."

"No, we didn't," said Connie despairingly. "Dad was unconscious for two days after I found him. I had an awful time getting him to the house and going for help. He was in bed for a month, and a heavy rain washed out the trail sign that night."

RISING quickly to her feet she went to the buffet and returned with a small, rough object.

"There were two rustlers. It was about dusk when they held Dad up and he tackled them in the half dark. We found this lying beside him where they had scuffled."

Tolman took the object in his hand. It was evidently a watch charm—a gold nugget, rough and yellow, mounted and evidently torn from a chain. Two links were attached.

"Black Hills gold," Tolman remarked. "Let's go out and look at the stock."

As the two walked out to the corral, Tolman could feel the nearness of the girl pulling at him. She was beautiful and good. He wondered how, even with her father's queerness, she could have remained single in this country of few women.

Loomis was in the corral among the gentle stock, running his hands over their sleek sides.

"Have they got yore brand on 'em, Loomis?" asked Dave as they came up.

"No," absentmindedly replied the old man, his eyes lingering on the stock. "They just had vented brands, drifted off 'fore I got around to slapping mine on. We'll have to do that right away, Connie."

"Are you shore that they're yours, Loomis?" persisted Dave.

"Sartin," the old man stated flatly. "I'd know 'em anywheres. Why shouldn't they be mine? I got the only blooded stock in the country."

"Look at that bull," he went on, pointing to the animal. "Look at the markin's on the critter. White face, white stockin's all round, with the white runnin' up his hind quarters clean to the short ribs. Look how wide he is between the eyes. That's a bull, man, what is a bull."

"He shore is," said Tolman thoughtfully. "He shore is." Turning to the girl, he said, "I'll have to be ridin' on, Connie, but I'll be seein' you in a few days."

As the two walked to Dave's bronc, the girl said, "Oh, must you go so soon! I'm sure you and Dad would have a fine visit tonight if you could stay this evening."

"I'd be pleased to stay, ma'am," he said, "but I'll have to ride."

Swinging up, he turned to hold down a tanned hand to the girl. She took it gravely, meeting his glance with pathetic eyes.

"Keep your chin up, Connie," he said. "Maybe things'ull work out for the best. I'll be back."

Riding away, Tolman was deep in thought. He didn't head for his spread but turned his mount's nose to the east.

"Lay into it, Snuffy," he told the broomtail. "We got a heap of ridin' to do."

It was three days later that Tolman entered the office of the Clayton spread where he had bought his stock. Sam Clayton greeted him warmly.

"Howdee, Tolman," he said heartily. "Back after more stock?"

"Yeah," drawled the youngster, sliding into an easy chair and throwing one spurred heel over the arm. "I figger I kin use about fifty head more. Forty-nine heifers and a young bull."

"Well," said Clayton, "I guess we can fix you up at the same price as we charged for the others. Got the cash on you?"

"I can handle the payment end of it," drawled Dave, carefully looking the rancher over.

Sam Clayton was a big man, big physically and apparently big financially if his clothes and office were any indication. Prosperity showed in every detail. He sat back now, drawing contentedly on a fat cigar, a smile on his face, arms clasped behind his head, white shirt spotless.

"You're the kind of a man I like to do business with, Tolman," he said with a laugh, peering at the younger man with his pale, shrewd eyes. "You state your wants and lay the dinero on the line."

"I'll pay the price," said Dave, looking at him. "But this time I want you to make delivery."

"Why," said Clayton, after some hesitation, "I guess we can do that. Your spread lays down southeast on the Clearwater, you told me. How far is it down there?"

"No," remarked Dave slowly, watching the man. "I know I told you that when I bought from you before, but I got prowlin' around and located better grass. Finally settled on a piece to the northwest—up on the Little Powder."

CLAYTON'S face did not change by so much as the flicker of an eyelash. He retained his position, puffing contentedly on his cigar.

"Hmmm," he said thoughtfully. "That's a mite farther away. I don't calculate that we'd want to deliver way over there."

"Well," drawled Dave, "I need the stock. Guess I kin drift 'em up myself."

"On second thought," said Clayton, gazing at the ceiling, "I don't think we can spare fifty head of two-year-olds right now."

"Never saw a feller before," remarked Dave, swinging his leg lazily down from the chair arm and reaching for the makings, "who would deliver stock southeast and wouldn't sell 'em northwest."

"It's not that, Tolman," said Clayton. "It's just that I remembered previous commitments, you understand."

Tolman finished rolling his smoke, scratched a match on his boot heel and cupped his big hands around the flame, shielding it from the wind from mere force of habit. He flipped the match aside and inhaled deeply.

"I shore met a queer duck up on the Powder," he drawled. "Feller by the name of Looney Loomis. Seems the jasper had fifty head of blooded stock just like you sold me—bought 'em in the East six years ago. Somebody bent a gun barrel over his dome about dark one night and blew out'n the country with the whole bunch."

"You don't say," Clayton remarked politely.

"Yeah," said Tolman. "But that ain't the funniest part of it. Seems like when the feller come to his senses he don't remember nothin' about what happened noways. He can't find no stock so he goes lookin' for 'em regardless of what his daughter tells him. He's been lookin' ever since, nigh onto six years now—summer and winter."

"Probably never had any stock," remarked Clayton. "Must be crazier than a hoot owl."

"That's what folks up that way think. Me, I'm not so shore. His daughter tells me that when she picked the old man up she found a gold nugget watch charm layin' where her father struggled with the bandits. Almost a matchin' piece to them cuff links yuh're wearin', Clayton. Pity you ain't got the one found at the scene of the crime; it would shore fill yore set out."

Clayton's eyes were sharp now, narrowed down.

"What are you getting at, Tolman?" he snapped. "Yuh're talkin' right peculiar."

"I took another look at that bull of yores as I rode in. He's the spittin' image of the two-year-old you sold me."

"Of course he is," exploded Clayton with vehemence. "My stock breeds true to type."

"Too true to type for yore own good, mister," snapped Dave. "Old man Loomis tells me that the bull he had rustled six years ago was the spittin' image of mine, and that bull of yours is about eight years old now."

"Lookee here," growled Clayton, tensing in his chair. "Quit this rambling palaver and get down to cases. Watch charms, bulls, crazy sheep-herders. What the devil are you getting at anyway? I'm a busy man."

"You'll be a busier man, mister," exploded Dave, "explainin' how you run Loomis blooded stock way over here into Dakota six years ago, and how you managed never to sell none up his way, and how yore watch charm happened to be found beside Loomis."

Clayton lunged to his feet with a hoarse cry flipping a short barreled Colt from beneath his arm as he came out of his chair. Tolman dropped to the floor like a stone, reached under the desk, seized the rancher's ankles in a powerful grip and yanked. The man toppled like a falling tree with the younger man swarming over him, gripping his gun hand with all his strength. Pinning the banker's shoulder to the floor with his knees, he beat the hand on the floor until the pistol flew free. Then he leaped to his feet, kicking the Colt into the far corner and filling his own hand.

"Get up, Clayton," he said softly. "I'm goin' to hang yore hide on the wall like a coyote's."

THE rancher lunged to his feet peering at the younger man with eyes in which grudging admiration showed.

"Yuh're a curly wolf, Tolman," he remarked ruefully. "Never should have tried to get the drop on you. Now that you're top dog, would you mind showing me that nugget. I won mine from a jasper in Honda City."

"Yeah," drawled Tolman sarcastically. "Who was he? Some drifter, I suppose, that a man can't locate?"

"You're wrong there," said the rancher. "I got them from Bronc Courtet—the same man that I bought my blooded stock from, six years ago."

"You've got a bill of sale, I suppose?" taunted Dave.

"I shore have; step back from that safe and I'll break it out."

Tolman stepped aside, cocking the six-gun.

"Step back from that safe door when she swings open," he warned. "If you reach for a gun in there, I'll bore you in the back."

The rancher swiftly spun the dial, turned the handle and swung open the safe. He stepped back saying, "Reach into that upper right hand drawer; you'll find the paper you want there."

Holding down on the man, Dave eased over to the safe, extracted the papers and thumbed through them with half an eye. Finding the one he looked for, he raised his eyes to look full at the rancher.

"Either yuh're awful cute, mister, or there's something plumb strange in all this. I'm ridin' for Honda city, but I'll be back."

"We're both riding for Honda City," said Clayton quietly. "It's my neck in the noose, not yours, Tolman. We'll need fresh mounts. It's a fast three-hour ride."

It was well along on the shank of the afternoon when the two men reached the little settlement of Honda City. The place was little more than a crossroads, with Bronc Courtet's saloon and gambling hall, a grocery and general store and a watering trough. Tolman had been studying Clayton as they rode. The rancher's fine clothes were now covered with white alkali dust and his face was grim. As the two men dismounted in front of the saloon the rancher spoke for the first time since they had set out.

"Bronc's a tough hombre, Tolman. Better loosen yore six-gun."

Dave looked at the man speculatively.

"Yuh're not armed. I'm sorry, but I don't trust you yet."

After this exchange the two strode into the saloon. The long bar ran down one side with card tables arranged along the opposite wall. Four men sat at one of these, and the bartender stood behind the bar. As Tolman hesitated, letting his eyes get used to the light, Clayton strode over to the bar as the tender whipped out two glasses and raised his voice in greeting.

"Howdy, Sam," he boomed. "What brings you way over here? What'll it be? It's on the house."

"I want you to meet a friend of mine," drawled Clayton. "Dave Tolman from the Powder. I'm selling him some of my blooded stuff that I got from you six years ago. He don't like the looks of my bill of sale."

Bronc Courtet was a big man, too. Big, and dark, with beetle brows, and bold eyes. The pleasant smile faded from his face as he turned to Dave. The chatter at the card table ceased as though a blanket had been thrown over the players. Two men rose and sidled up to the bar—a tall, lean, tawny man, and a short, stocky, slow moving gent with heavy features. Tolman's eyes flickered over the pair before he spoke

to Bronc.

"Just a matter of business, Courtet," he drawled. "I'm goin' to raise that blooded stock and when I give a bill of sale I'll want to know what stands behind it. All I want is for you to show your paper from the man you bought Clayton's stock from. Fair enough?"

"I don't like your face, mister, or the way you talk," growled Bronc. "I bought that stuff in the East, and to the devil with you."

"Now, now!" soothed Dave. "Don't get yore back humped, feller. It's bad business to snap at a gent who rides a hundred miles to return yore property."

"Return my property," echoed Bronc. "What do yuh mean?"

Tolman laid the Black Hills nugget charm on the bar.

"Yeah," he drawled, "Clayton tells me that he won yore cuff links off you at poker. I brung the watch charm to the set back. Knew you'd be wantin' it."

FASCINATED, the bartender gazed at the tiny Black Hills nugget as it lay winking on the bar, his face a mixture of conflicting thoughts.

"Where did you find it?" he asked finally.

"Right where you bent that pistol barrel over Pop Loomis' noggin when you rustled his stock six years back," drawled Tolman.

The room was quiet now—so quiet that the buzzing of the blue bottle flies sounded loud in the saloon. Bronc was leaning over the bar, frozen with a half completed swipe of his bar cloth—the two men at the side were poised for action. Dave had stepped back as he spoke, while Clayton elbowed the bar, his eyes hard and cold on Courtet.

The silence hung like a solid wall for a moment, then the room exploded into action. Dave Tolman spun on his heel, his arm moving down and up as his Colt spewed fire and thunder at the two men down the bar. Splinters flew from the floor at his feet as the lean man sagged heavily against the mahogany, took three mincing steps toward Tolman, his shoulder and chin skidding along the polished surface, one arm hanging limply down, a six-gun dangling by the trigger guard from one finger.

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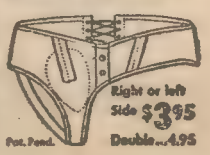

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Then the man turned over, landing flat on his back on the floor, motionless. The stocky man with the heavy features, taken aback by the lightninglike opening of the battle, moved slowly.

Tolman's second slug caught him in the throat, his gun half cleared from leather. He stood on tip toe and then dived between the lean man's outstretched legs. The other two men near the card table remained motionless, their hands outspread on the table top.

Tolman whirled back to face Bronc, his Colt pointed straight up, poised, to be flung down with the weight of the long barrel acting as a cocking lever. Smoke curled from its muzzle. The cowboy froze in that position, like a coiled rattler. A slow grin spread over his face.

"I knew you had that Derringer, Clayton," he drawled. "Wondered who you'd draw it on."

The big rancher had stepped back from the bar. He stood there spraddle-legged with the wicked gambler's pet weapon trained on Bronc Courtet's chest. The saloonkeeper was frozen as he had been at the start of the action, his hand still arrested half way through his bar cleaning swipe.

"I liked yore cards, Tolman," Clayton remarked, "and the way you played 'em, so I took a hand."

"I figgered that I could depend on you to cover my back," drawled Tolman. "Them two sidewinders down the bar were this jasper's gunfighters."

"You can't prove nothin'," blustered Courtet, his face ashy with panic now.

"The blazes we can't!" grated Sam. "There's plenty of honest folks hereabouts that knew that nugget dress set of yours. Yore neck's in the noose, Bronc.

"Come out from behind that bar; we're takin' you to the sheriff in Cottonwood. I hope they hang you!"

"That's right," drawled Tolman. "But I won't stick around to see you swing. There's a girl up on the Powder that I'm hankerin' to see again, pronto. Got a heap of courtin' to do."

"Fine," said Clayton. "I'll deliver those fifty head as soon as I get this rattler behind bars. You've paid the price, Tolman."

(Continued from page 10)

were regular weekly occurrences, and Cole was there with his long-coupled, limber-legged horse. Out of derision several sports bantered Cole for a race, to which he readily consented, amid the hoots of the crowd. A long-haired, wealthy planter, with a clean cut and noted racer of the neighborhood, was Cole's antagonist. The amount of the stakes was $1,000, which was deposited with a man on the ground, an entire stranger to Cole, but he never anticipated any unfairness.

Foul Play

Cole was riding his own horse, and they got a fairly even start, the track was a half mile track and was in fine condition. For the first quarter the two horses ran practically neck and neck, but on the last quarter Cole turned on the speed and his horse drew away and was winning by several lengths, when a fellow jumped out in front of Cole's horse, throwing a red blanket across the track, and causing Cole's horse to break the track and cut across the open field, thereby losing the race.

Cole rode back to the starting point and claimed a foul. The crowd made sport of his claim, derided his horse and flung epithets at him. Seeing that it was the intention of the racers to defraud him, he appealed to the judges, and then to the stake-holder. All of them laughed at him, and the stake-holder promptly turned the money over to the owner of the other horse.

It makes any fellow mad to be robbed, especially by trickery, and to be derided by one who has robbed is only adding insult to injury. Cole Younger's face grew paler than usual, his brow lowered and his lips became nervous; it was evident that there was a struggle going on within him. Knowing that he stood alone in all that crowd, that he perhaps had no chance if he started a battle, in all probability he was trying to persuade himself to swallow his pride, take the slick trimming they had given him and depart, but it was no use, he was just not made of that kind of stock.

He remained perfectly still on his horse for nearly a minute, hearing the derisive bantering of the crowd, and then he turned partly in his saddle, drew two navy revolvers and

[*Turn page*]

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opened fire. The first shot killed the stakeholder, and the two judges fell next under his steady aim, while in quick succession, five others received terrible wounds from which three of them never recovered.

After the slaughter Cole rode swiftly away with none to pursue him. The crowd was practically dumbfounded by the swiftness of the action. They had, as they had started out to do, trimmed a sucker, but they had paid a fearful toll for so doing!

Crimes Aplenty

No doubt there were any number of robberies that the James and Younger Gang never pulled but they got the blame for the crimes, just as many other outlaws received credit or were charged with committing crimes that they had nothing to do with, but this James-Younger gang was always busy and they committed crimes aplenty. They robbed banks, trains, stage coaches, not only in Missouri but in many other states.

They even robbed the gate of the Kansas City Fair, rode right up in broad daylight when thirty thousand people were attending the fair and horse races and robbed the main gate of the receipts of admission, taking more than ten thousand dollars, and they did it so coolly, and with such precision, that they had finished the robbery and had ridden on before the great crowd realized that the gate had been robbed.

The gang had the advantage of knowing the country in most of the places they operated. They also had friends who would help or shield them, but as their list of crimes grew and they were looking for more worlds to conquer, they branched out further and further from what had been their home base, and this in reality caused their downfall.

On to Minnesota

After robbing the Missouri Pacific Railroad, the boys split up as they often did, the James boys going to Texas and the Younger boys holing up in a secret cavern in Jackson County, Missouri, but after a few months they were together again and planning other robberies.

With the James boys were Bill Chadwell, Clell Miller and Charley Pitts. Chadwell had lived in Minnesota, and he proposed that they shift their operation to that state, pointing out that it was rich territory for their

work. It is said that all the gang except Cole Younger agreed, but Cole voiced an opinion that it was too far from their regular territory, their friends and the hideouts that they knew so well. However, he allowed the majority to rule, and as he saw that all the rest of the gang wanted to try their luck in Minnesota he threw in with them.

They proceeded by train to Minnesota and then under the guise of being surveyors visited many parts of a large section, jotted down the avenues of escape and the places that could be used as hideouts. They visited and cased many towns, including Owatonna, Dundas, Madelia and Northfield, and finally decided to rob the bank at Northfield.

The procedure was that three of the bandits rode into town, hitched their horses in front of the First National Bank, and stood on the sidewalk leisurely talking until three others rode in from one end of the street, and two from the other direction, shooting, yelling and ordering everybody off the street.

At this juncture the three in front of the bank quickly dashed inside and held up the three men in the bank. One of the men showed fight, and getting him out of the way consumed some time. Meanwhile, the citizens, being aware of what was taking place, began grabbing any kind of weapon that was handy and a battle raged upon the street, the citizens shooting from windows and doorways at almost every angle.

A Pitched Battle

It was a pitched battle with casualties on both sides, and the gunfire was so hot that the bandits were in a hurry to get away. They left the cashier dead, and another of the men in the bank badly wounded. One man of the citizens' group was killed on the street. Bill Chadwell, who instigated the robbery, was killed. Clell Miller was shot from his horse. Bob Younger received a bullet wound that shattered his right elbow, but continued in the battle, using his left hand for the handling of his revolver. Jim Younger lost his horse and was afoot as the others were riding away. Cole Younger rode back in the face of heavy gunfire and took his brother up on the horse with him, and about that time Jim was shot in the mouth and Frank James received a wound in his knee.

The bandits who were still alive got out of

[*Turn page*]

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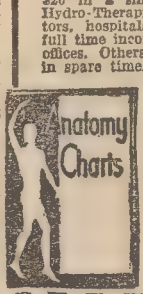

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town, but left a trail of blood from their wounds, and then there were a number of days of slow moving, of privation, as they tried to shake off their pursuers.

Brotherly Love

Jim Younger was so weak from loss of blood and the wound in the mouth was bleeding so freely that Jesse James proposed to Cole Younger that they kill Jim and get him out of his misery and at the same time heighten their chances for escape. This made Cole so mad that he and Jesse came near fighting a duel right there, and Cole told the James boys and any others who wanted to go with them to strike out. He would stay with his brother to the finish.

If the words attributed to Cole Younger on that occasion are true, they show a great deal of brotherly love and sentiment. These words were: "Never meet me again after you have suggested that I kill my brother; why, I'll stay by him till he dies and then I'll carry his dead body with me as long as my strength makes it possible."

While the James boys escaped, Cole Younger did carry his brother on, carried him through swamps, over streams, into the deepest recesses of the forest, carried him to the very end of his endurance, and then, weakened by privation, stiff from the chill of the nights, he laid his brother down gently and tried his feeble best to make a last stand, but being completely surrounded knew that it was the end of his career and wisely surrendered. His criminal days were over.

Well, waddies, guess that is about all we can give out from the old Bunk House this time, but we'll be seeing you again in a couple of moons. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

TAKING a pasear over into the Yellowstone country, Bob Pryor claps eyes for the first time upon that region of natural wonders and runs smack into as bloody and hellish an outlaw scheme as ever unlimbered his guns in the cause of justice.

The occasion for all this shooting is entitled THE YELLOWSTONE EMPIRE and we're glad to state it is one of the rootinest and tootinest Rio Kid adventures ever to pass over this editorial desk.

Imagine, if you will, a bunch of renegade

Mormons kicked out of Salt Lake City by Brigham Young, organizing themselves into a gang of highwaymen called "The Black Saints." The profession of these gentle creatures was robbery and murder and the murder was not incidental, by any means. They always massacred their victims to the last man on the well known assumption that "dead men tell no tales."

But sometimes there's a joker in the well-known refrain. The "Black Saints" left old Saïaratus Reynolds, teamster, quite thoroughly dead, they thought. But the old timer was as tough as whang leather and he died hard. He lived long enough to gasp out a few words to the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles, who found him choking out his life beside the trailside pool where he had been shot down.

". . . leader of . . . Black Saints . . . Race Randum . . ." the old man choked.

The Rio Kid learned the name of the leader, a deserter from the army whom he knew. He also had the beginnings of a trail which was to lead him to the incredible dream of empire set up by Race Randum—

[*Turn page*]

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a plot to turn the vast wild Yellowstone country into an outlaws' fortress where even the U.S. Army would not dare to attack!

The Black Saints stopped killing prisoners except where unavoidable. They captured them alive now and carried them off to the Yellowstone canyon where history's clock was turned back thousands of years. Like the ancient Egyptian slaves, chained and beaten, the prisoners toiled to quarry huge blocks of stone, to pile them up into walls, to cut logs and fashioned rafters so that Race Randum would have a headquarters which was in effect a stone fortress.

It was to this slave camp that soldiers, surveyors, prospectors and engineers had been steadily disappearing. It was to investigate this mystery that the Rio Kid and General Miles rode forth into the unknown Yellowstone, guided by Jim Bridger, who knew that country as no other man. And little did they dream that the great General Miles himself would labor at the end of a chain, feel the lash of the whip on his naked back!

To the accompaniment of pistol shots and the cries of men locked in deadly combat, Nature plays a majestic accompaniment on her own orchestra, the spouting geysers, the bubbling hot springs and the crashing waterfalls of the Yellowstone.

You'll chuckle at Jim Bridger's tall tales of the incredible country, and like the Rio Kid himself, you'll wonder where lie blended into truth, so fantastic are the real facts. And you'll gasp at the whirlwind finish to the tale, as outraged Nature takes its toll of the men who flouted her.

THE YELLOWSTONE EMPIRE, by Walker A. Tompkins, is the new big Rio Kid novel for the next issue!

Along with the Rio Kid novel, we have a fine collection of short stories, picked to keep you on the edge of your seat as you read. There is also an article which you'll enjoy—ANYBODY'S HORSES, by Don Glassman. This interesting piece deals with the last of the wild horse herds today. For years now, the old croakers have been sing-

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ing the funeral march of the wild horse, but that sassy critter keeps right on sailing over the range, though the odds against him get bigger all the time.

ANYBODY'S HORSES tells the whole turbulent story, the history of the mustang, the horses that remain and what the outlook for them is. It's packed full of information.

And in addition, we'll have, as always, THE BUNK HOUSE, by that grand old westerner, Foghorn Clancy, the thumbnail sketches of historical people who appear in the Rio Kid stories, special features, this column of things to come and a word or two from our readers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FIRST letter is from faithful reader Walker A. Tompkins, whom some of you will recognize as the author of a good many Rio Kid novels. Author Tompkins has received a letter from a reader which has left him slightly baffled.

Shortly after BUGLES ON THE BIGHORN was published, I received a letter from an old Injun fighter, a direct descendant of Kit Carson's. He wrote me at considerable length, commending me on my accuracy, etc., in depicting the Custer massacre. I was feeling pretty good about this compliment from a real old-timer, when he went on to say that he had occasionally seen the villain saloon [illegible] the Ace of Spades

[illegible]bow was pure inven- [illegible] was the Ace of Spades [illegible]e that leaves me!—*Walker* [illegible]*arbara, Cal.*

[illegible]hat leaves you, Walker, [illegible]pany. We had a letter [illegible] the other day saying [illegible]ll, used to punch [illegible]razos. Since [illegible]us character,

[illegible]sterns you [illegible]blish and when [illegible]n, pass them along to another [illegible]ver we get into port I stock up with a new supply. It's pretty lonesome, being out to sea so much, and reading magazines, or letters, whenever anybody writes me is about all the recreation I get. And if that sounds like an invitation, it is.—*E. E. Donovan, S.N., U.S.S. Fechteler D D 870, c/c F.P.O. San Francisco.*

[*Turn page*]

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Pity the poor sailors on a night like this. But how can it be lonely out there on the billowy wave with the Rio Kid and Celestino to keep you company? And no commuting to and fro from work—think of all the time that gives you to read!

I've been reading RIO KID WESTERN and TEXAS RANGERS for a long time and think they are tops in the western field. RAIDERS OF THE WRECKAGE, which I have just finished, was one of the best. Whoever suggested that Jim Hatfield and Bob Pryor and Celestino work together had a wonderful idea. Let's try it.—*Eulan Calk, Austin, Texas.*

Anything might happen, but we can't be sure. One thing we do know, that trio together could probably mop up any opposition it came across, regardless of numbers. That's probably what you would like to see—how much of an army they could lick.

I'd like to add one more sour note to the groans about Custer in BUGLES ON THE BIGHORN. Why give a glory-hunter that much publicity anyway? Custer didn't amount to anything and his whole career in the army didn't have that (snap) much influence on United States history. So why keep talking about him?

—*James V. Bennett, Hutchinson, Kan.*

Opinion on Custer is like opinion on California, James. There are no moderates. Either Custer was a hero or Custer was a heel. You never hear anyone say Custer was just a nice fellow. Same way about California. People who have been there either rave about it like mad, or can't wait to get away from there and never have a kind word to say for the place.

You never hear anyone say, moderately, that it's just nice.

Anyway, it's time for us to be pulling out freight, so until next issue, with THE YELLOWSTONE EMPIRE, don't tangle your ropes! And if you've got any opinions, good or bad, or just want to say howdy, drop us a line. Kindly address The Editor, RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Thanks, everybody, for joining this session. Be seeing you next month. And just in parting, here's a good tip for you—one of the grandest Western action yarns of all time is Frank H. Spearman's WHISPERING SMITH. It's now being shown around the country in a wonderful Technicolor movie produced by Paramount Pictures. Alan Ladd, Robert Preston, Brenda Marshall and Donald Crisp are among the stars. Go see it. And don't say we didn't tell you!

—THE EDITOR.

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